

Soul Of A Dragon

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Summary: Astrid is picture perfect, only, she's not. And now she has to worry about the most feared and mysterious Dragon out there who is downed, hidden in the forest...and just happens to know the secret that could get her killed.

## 1. How To Meet A Night Fury

Vikings are a simple type of people. No, I'm not joking. You don't believe me? Well, we're hard headed, stubborn, good with weapons, and tend to attack things before we look at reason. So we're not the smartest. That's okay because we've survived here on Berk perfectly fine for seven generations in our homes and our lives and our everyday routines. Of course, even the things that the eye tends to skip over have their, shall we say, \_off-putting aspects,\_ and Berk is no exception. It's not the Vikings that are the problem, no, see; we have these certain pests that just refuse to go away. But they're not the ordinary pests that everyone has the fortune to deal with. Here, we have-

A line of fire goes shooting back and I quickly dive beneath it, narrowly missing the flames.

"Dragons," I snarl crudely, giving the freak of nature in front of me the most icy glare I can summon, which, believe you me, can be pretty scary. I would go into more detail, but, well, I'm a little occupied.

I say Dragons, and I use the term lightly. That's really just our term for them. Dragons aren't \_really \_Dragons, but, in a way, they are. Does that make sense? No? Well, Vikings aren't known for their abilities to explain things, but I suppose it won't kill me to try.

Real Dragons, or, as we call them, Ancestral Dragons, died out a long time ago, way before I was even born. We Vikings tended to war with

them (hey, just like, what do you know, nowadays) until eventually, their numbers dwindled down to extinction. We thought that was the end of it but oh no, that was just the beginning. It wasn't until many years later when the Berkians were under the false impression of peace that the first Viking Bonded. That's another term we have, a term specifically meant for Draconic kind. The thing is, Dragons only died out for half a century or so. Then, they returned in the way we least expected them to: from inside us. Literally. Nobody can stop Bonding, it's not a choice, it's an occurrence. Nobody knows how it happens or why, there appears to be no pattern to the disease, but once a Viking begins to Bond, they're done for.

An Ancestral Dragon will Bond with a Viking, turning him or her into a mindless beast with wings, claws, fangs, tails, and eyes of a vicious fire-breathing creature. Of course, Dragons don't actually breathe fire, they spout it from their hands because, well, they do still have some human genes and humans- if you don't know already- are not made to breathe fire. All the same, it's a terrifying process, one that has cost us hundreds in the past.

But, us being us, refuse to let them win. We fight them, any way we can. A Viking found to be Turning is to be banished before they can inflict harm upon the village. Once they Turn they don't remember their lives, their family, their tribe. They don't even remember themselves. That's why they're so dangerous.

This one is a Gronkle, a Boulder Class Dragon with a hide thick as rock and the molten fire of a volcano. They're tough, but not impossible. This one is young, maybe a few years older than me. She has a heavy build as all Gronkles with small, ugly brown wings, yellow slit eyes, and claws outstretched- ready to kill.

\_It, \_I correct myself. \_It, not she.\_

Even though the former person is obviously female, it just doesn't work that way. Dragons don't get genders. They don't have names, they don't have emotions, they don't have souls, and they certainly don't get genders. There is no free will to a Dragon except its Ancestral instincts, that is what's drilled into us in Training. They. Are. Not. Human. End of story.

I narrow my eyes at it, daring, just \_daring \_the Gronkle to get me. It lets out one tremendous roar and I charge it with the speed of lightning, my battle ax swinging high and dangerously. The Dragon reluctantly recognizes a greater warrior and growls at me, buzzing off right after gobbling up a pile of fish. I huff, blowing my straw-colored bangs out of my face, glaring at its retreating form. Another Dragon will have to pay for that insufferable little thief.

Suddenly, my battle field instincts kick in and I sense something behind me. I slowly turn around and I do something I rarely ever do: I freeze.

A Deadly Nadder has landed not ten feet away and is focusing its subhuman eyes on me, the yellow color practically glowing in the light of the flames dancing across the rooftops in the night sky.

Deadly Nadders. I shudder inwardly at the very thought. They're

actually a quite common Dragon, one that most Vikings go after as a first or second or third kill. Not particularly dangerous, though those sneaky little suckers got an advantage of a tail filled with poisonous spines that they could shoot with fatal accuracy, but they aren't just another Dragon to me. This is the species that killed my parents.

In the night, the Nadder's patches of scales are a hazy green, the accents on its wings are a more reddish color with a cream underside. Its white crown of horns protruding from its head seem to be brighter than they actually are. Its large, pointed wings are pointed downwards in a nonthreatening way, but I don't buy it for a second.

All Dragon species seem to have different kinds of wings; Nadders' are always attached to their arms but they are big enough that when they fly they don't look like idiots flapping their arms up and down. Arguably, they're one of the better looking species, but they couldn't be more hideous to me.

The green Dragon cackles and cocks its head at me. Then, its head shoots into the air and the spiked tail whips around, raised and poised to shoot.

Something very loud sounds behind me and I realize it's a battle cry right before I'm harshly shoved out of the way. Eret, son of Eret (whoever named that child should be tied to a mast and shipped to fall off the ends of the earth), charges in with his sword, though he disregards the blade as he gifts the Nadder with a vicious punch to the face right before it can snap at him with its wicked sharp teeth.

"What do you think you're doing?"

I can't tell if he's amused or actually, genuinely pissed off, but I don't care as I catch my breath on the ground.

I hear him sigh, striding over. Eret's a bit more on the leaner side for a Viking, dressed with several types of furs. He has black hair that touches his ears but are covered by a mildly impressive helmet with horns that I'm not even sure he's familiar with the beast they originated from. In all, he's not the \_worst \_looking Viking out there, but, like me, he's a bit more on the focused side of things, and I can connect with and understand that.

"You alright, there?" he asks, and I nod, reaching for my ax that lays just a few feet from me. Falling to the ground with a sharpened weapon, don't try this in your own village, kids. He then smiles, showing a rare, bemused grin. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were afraid of Nadders."

Quicker than he can wipe his smirk off his face, I stand and lean in to his face with my battle ax in hand, growling, "Say that again, I dare you."

He has a head or two on me, not to mention he's a few years my senior, but I'm not intimidated in the least to take him on. I've defeated better in physical Training.

"Easy there, don't bite my head off," he holds his hands up,

surrendering. Then, the nitwit has the nerve to \_laugh \_and shout out, "Your welcome for saving your life!" as he runs off.

I don't remember thanking him nor being in danger in the first place, but I dismiss it. Boys will be boys. They're such a distraction. Actually, most other people are a distraction. Can you blame me for wanting to train by myself most (all) of the time?

A chorus of angry voices sound from around the corner and, double checking to be sure that my arm wrappings are secure, I quickly take my leave to find the village blacksmith, Gobber, who also happens to be the only person remotely close to family that I have. He's not blood related to me directly, but, well, I've been through a bit in my childhood and he was the only one willing to take me in seeing as he had no direct family either. I've learned quite a few things from him, even though my heart's on the battle field.

"Well, nice of you to join the party," he greets with his heavy Scottish accent and thick, braided mustache falling off the sides of his mouth. He waves his one hand, and instead of the appendage that should be there, in its place is a hammer greater than the circumference of my head.

"You know me," I say dryly, picking up a pile of disfigured, contorted swords and dropping them on a bed of coals. "Always the Dragon killer."

"Now, you know you're not supposed to be doing any killing before your Training's over, right?"

"Yes, Gobber," I roll my eyes. "I didn't even get to really fight anything, anyway."

Our brief conversation is cut off by a small, eerie noise that presents itself to all of our ears, softly at first, then it grows in volume and intensity. I quickly glance up. That's a cry known and feared by all, the only warning we get before it strikes. The most mysterious and deadly Dragon out there. We call it the-

"Night Fury!" someone cries just a following shouts out, "Get down!"

"Ju-ump!" Stoick the Vast, chief of our tribe and the best Viking known to this day, demands and not a moment too soon. Just as his massive figure leaps off the tower he had previously been standing on, a ring of blue fire spans out and the building bursts into flames, collapsing to the ground.

The only thing closest to a sighting of a Night Fury is its silhouette. Nobody has ever killed one in the history of everything. They're just too dangerous. I'm not entirely sure why, but the beast intrigues me. It never steals food, never shows itself, and, as demonstrated time and time before, it never misses.

Another structure of ours is sent tumbling to the ground by the invisible force that is the Night Fury.

It is said to be impossible to kill one. That they're invincible. They are smarter, faster, and superior to all Draconic kind.

I glance down at my lower arms, which are still snug in their wool wrappings. They itch with a burning fury but I don't dare touch them. My eyes narrow before going back to work.

\* \* \*

><p><em>Thunk! <em>My ax hits its target with a satisfying sound. I growl, yanking it out of the tree before hurling it into another. Yank, aim, hurl, \_thunk!, \_repeat. The cycle goes on and on, again and again.

I try not to focus on the worries that Gobber had ever so slightly expressed this morning, about me being a female Viking and getting to "that age". I can be a successful warrior \_without \_a husband! I don't need anyone protecting me, and if they want to, they can try. It probably doesn't help that my variety consists of a shut-in older guy, a mentally challenged pain-seeker, a wimpy brainiac, and&#128| Snotlout.

With a ferocious scream I hurl my ax as hard as I can and I hear it dig deep into the tree. I pause for a moment, catching my breath. Slowly, I make my way over to it and try to yank it out, but it doesn't budge. Great.

My arms are killing me but not in a sore way. I know it's dangerous, but it's been this way for three days now, a little air won't hurt, right? Besides, I'm so far in the woods, not even Bucket has wandered to this area. I take a deep sigh and carefully unwrap the bindings.

Now, do not be mistaken with the thought that I am weak. I am not afraid of anything, least of all Dragons. But that doesn't stop people from pitying me. And why shouldn't they? I mean, I'm the last of my line, what with my parents killed by Deadly Nadders, and what shame I must feel with my family name tarnished by my Uncle Finn Bonding with an Ancestral Flightmare.

I have watched my family ripped from me when I was helpless to do anything other than watch- twice. I was merely a babe when my parents were first killed. I don't remember much about the accident, it wasn't exactly a memorable way to go, death by Dragons, but I can still picture their limp bodies dangling from the claws of those \_creatures.\_

And I've never told anyone this, but I watched my uncle Turn.

I was six when I sat behind a cracked door, watching as glowing blue, transparent wings sprouted from his arched back, as his claws unsheathed themselves from his hands as if they had been there all along, as his eyes slowly dilated until they were no longer the familiar stormy blue, but the glowing blue of something that was not \_human. \_All while he \_looked \_partially human.

Watching him suffer through the transformation, sitting there praying to the gods that he would not sense the little girl cowering behind the door, that wasn't my biggest secret.

No, my biggest secret was that I had thought him beautiful.

But how can that be? There he was, Turning into a monster before my

very eyes, just another to fall victim to Dragon kind and leaving me all alone, a glowing, roaring, terrifying beast, and yet I had been thinking that he was a beautiful specimen, if I had ever seen one.

Up until a few weeks ago, that was my biggest secret. But now, it's different. Things have changed, \_I've \_changed, everything is just completely upside down and wrong.

The scales on the inside of my wrists are growing.

Turning has never been known to be this agonizingly slow. My uncle had taken three days- I'm on week four and I still don't know what kind of Dragon I am. Not that I really care, just, you know, it'd be kind of nice to know what kind of monster is trying to possess you.

But I won't let it happen. It's taking this long for a reason. I can fight it; I'm strong enough, I can do it. I will not let this creature take over my mind. I am me and I want what is rightfully mine. I will not allow anyone- Dragon or Viking- to claim me as their own.

The weird thing is, though, the fact that I'm Bonding isn't my biggest secret. Yes, I could get exiled, or even killed, if anyone found out, but that's just a secret I won't let anyone discover. Strange, I know, but I don't recall saying that I was an exceptionally intelligent one.

No.

My biggest secret, the one I will guard with my life above everything else is that I, Astrid Hofferson, am purely, and utterly terrified.

\* \* \*

><p>Something snaps in the distance and my head goes shooting up. I keep my eyes trained to the ground as I rely on my hearing to locate the owner of the noise. Nobody should be out here, there's not a chance that anyone could have seen, right? ...Right?<p>

Something small flutters down and brushes my shoulder. A leaf. Funny, there isn't any wind. A sinking feeling presents itself in my gut and I gradually look up, dreading what I might see.

The first, not to mention the only, thing I process is a pair of startlingly green eyes. A pair of startlingly green \_Dragon \_eyes.

\_Sonofahalf-trollrat-eatingmungebucketâ€¦!\_

A dark figure leaps down on top of me, growling viciously in my ear. We both go tumbling down a hill I somehow seem to have missed earlier on. I'm not gonna lie and say it's not painful because falling down a hill isn't fun anyways, imagine it with a clawed beast fighting for a slash at your throat to go with it!

Its heavy tail then comes into harsh contact with my face and my vision goes dark for a moment. With luck and a bit of fury on my

side, I manage to gain an upper hand and kick the Dragon in the face. It comes wheeling to a stop and warbles in confusion, maybe a little pain, too. Serves it right.

I spring to my feet, my Training with Gobber kicking in as I sprint back up the hill, racing to my ax still stuck in the tree. I grab the hilt with both hands and \_pull \_as hard as I can but the wood protests, seeming to tighten its hold on my blade. Not now, please, it could come back any second!

Just to prove my point, a loud roar echoes from below and I frantically jerk at it.

In one second, about fifty million things happen. My mind decides to focus on three. The first is the stark realization of \_holy gods of Asgard I'm being attacked by a Dragon. \_That gets tossed out of my mind as soon as it enters because, well, I've got more important things to think about. Like, for example, said Dragon \_leaping \_at me. The second is the Dragon itself, which I get a clear sight of for the first time. It's male, that's for sure. He's pitch black, nearly covered in scales, which is abnormal. Mostly, the scales are on their wings, around their tail, and some on the arms, but not the whole body. I don't know, it could be dirt. I don't exactly look long enough to establish. I don't recognize the species, my mind doesn't recall any pure black Dragons. All I know is that his wings are black, his clothes are black, his face and hair are black, and his eyes are \_green, green, green.\_

Then, finally, the one that I am most concerned with, is the hot, searing pain that shoots up my arm as I firmly yank my ax out just in time to swing it with force fed entirely by adrenaline- straight into the Dragon's face. It shrieks and rockets back into the sky.

Suddenly, I see a miniscule figure circling back around from the clouds and a hauntingly familiar screech fills the static air around me. My insides drop to the earth's core.

Oh my gods. Don't tell me. That couldn't have been- it wasn't a-

My suspicions are confirmed when a blue plasma blast explodes upon impact with the ground at my feet and I'm sent sailing through the air like a rag doll. I feel the weight of my fall land almost directly on my already dislocated(?) arm and I cry out, but my vision thankfully goes dark before the pain consumes my thoughts. Right before my eyes close, I can't help but notice a dry, cracked patch of scales on the inside of my outstretched arm.

\_Oh great Thor, he saw...\_

\* \* \*

><p>"Astrid is to stay. Put. There." Gobber demands, gesturing wildly at me like some child.<p>

After claiming I threw my shoulder out in practice and avoiding the village elder, Gothi, for an entire afternoon, it's nearing nighttime and the Dragon raids could begin at any moment. I blow my bangs out of my face, annoyed, because it just \_has \_to be my right arm that gets rendered useless for a couple weeks. Does he understand the work

I went through to make it look like nothing serious happened?  
Following arising in a dazed state, I don't think he gets just how hard it is to rewrap your arms with one hand! Not to mention the panic that comes with the territory, as well.

Chief Stoick looks at me. For a moment, I think he'll lean towards my side and let me get out there to fight a few Dragons, but instead, he just grumbles, "You heard Gobber. Stay in the forge."

"But that's not fair!" I protest.

"Too bad, lass. With that arm, you wouldn't last a minute out there," Gobber pats me on the back reassuringly but it doesn't help anything. I shake it off.

"Wanna bet?" I mutter, eying my ax hanging on the wall.

"Don't even think about it," he warns me and I huff, folding my arm and holding back a cringe when a stab of pain makes itself appear in my right arm. Gods, the one night I \_need \_to be out thereâ€¦!

Somewhere in our conversation, Stoick exits without us noticing until he's already gone. I don't entirely get why people always give me pity stares. It's not like it's a rare thing to be the last of your bloodline, take Chief Stoick for example; his wife Bonded years ago and took their only son with her.

I grumble to myself as I singlehandedly (literally) run through the forge procedures while Gobber assembles an array of weapons. There aren't any signs of attack, maybe there won't be any. Wouldn't that be a shame?

Nope, spoke too soon. The first rain of lava blasts come terrorizing down and instantly, Vikings of all ages come racing out with their weapons held high. That should be me.

I hear a shuffle of feet outside the forge window and recognize it as the other teens, but I don't glance up at them. It's a little annoying spending an entire night with Vikings dumping their discarded weapons to be repaired, only to run off with new ones without a word. Why oh why did this have to happen to me on this night of them all?

I'm drowning in my own pity when I hear it. The Night Fury's cry.

"Night Fury!"

"Get down!"

All the usual warnings. Sometimes, I find myself wondering whatever happened to our creative genes.

"Hold down the fort, Astrid," Gobber quickly shifts his hammer to a sword, "they need me out there."

I promptly fold my arms and give him a cold glare.

"You know it's for the best," he reasons with me. "You're not ready



to go back out."

"Whatever," is my response. He sighs, shaking his head and then hobbles away with a loud battle call. I keep my eyes on my ax still hanging on the wall, counting to ten to be sure he's really gone. Once I'm certain, a mischievous ghost of a smile graces my lips. I throw off my apron and run to the back room where a stack of my failed experiments had been kept.

I scurry to pull off the thick cloth shielding one such experiment from view. The wooden contraction doesn't look like much, but I can't throw anything. Good thing this is designed to do just that. I pat the top of it, "You, my friend, are going to be my ticket to freedom."

Just as the words leave my mouth, one my hands brushes against the frame in the wrong way and it snaps to life, springing a bola out and hitting some innocent Viking in the face. I cringe. Whoops. So it has some minor calibration issues, I can fix thatâ€¦ I think. Besides, inventing things aren't exactly my forte so there are going to be a few mishaps here and there. And no, I don't think it's necessary to bring every single mishap of every single invention to mind.

"Sorry!" I shout as I push through the crowd of running Vikings. After reloading the bola launcher, most of the tribe had been set on loading down the sheep so that gave me a perfect opportunity and I'm not one to pass fate up like this. Most of them just yell at me to get back inside seeing as my right arm is hanging limply by my side. I ignore them, muttering a 'Be right back!' to the ones who sound a little suspicious.

I hear something screech and get blown to bits and I know that the Dragon is near. I scrunch my face up in concentration as I set up the launcher, putting all of my focus into praying that this works. I \_need \_it to; when I said that no one must know, I really meant \_no one must know. \_And that included Dragons. I don't care if said species has never even been seen before, much less killed, I won't let a cursed \_Night Fury \_endanger everything that I have sacrificed to keep my place as a Viking. And for that reason, I need the Night Fury dead.

I can't afford to marvel in the fact that I faced one and came out alive, nor that I actually know what one looks like, if I tell anyone, first of all, who would believe me, and second, how would I explain being that deep in the woods? That Dragon saw the scales on my arms, he \_knows. \_I don't care if it's a Dragon, he still knows and I simply cannot allow any sort of threat to live in this world. If I have to eradicate a Dragon no Viking has ever killed before, the very offspring of lightning and death itself, I will.

And I swear to the gods, I see a vague outline of a boy with wings sailing through the night sky, soaring through the stars.

The air around me suddenly turns stagnant and the high pitched shriek echoes around. Not one moment passes after the explosion when I aim at what I think- what I \_hope- \_is the Night Fury and the force of the launch tosses me back. I grimace when my arm hits the ground but it's not among the things that are of importance to me.

Of the biggest is the shocking realization of \_oh my gods, I hit it! \_as a Dragon lets out a piercing scream I have not heard from any other species and a dark silhouette goes jetting down into the horizon, speeding towards the trees of Raven's Point. I- I did it. I hit it, it's down somewhere, probably unconscious. All I have to do is find it before anyone else does and take matters into my own hands. No big deal, it's just another Dragon.

â€| Then why is there a strange bile in the back of my throat that I can't quite diminish? What is it about this situation that feels just \_wrong \_and awful? Why is that Dragon's scream sending shivers down my spine, why is it arising goosebumps on the back of my neck, and most of all, \_why is it haunting me?\_

I convince myself that it's nothing, it's just the cry of a Dragon. They are nothing, they are not worthy of such mundane emotions like happiness, love, and, strangely not excluded, pain. They don't feel anything in general. It wasn't wrong, it was just a Dragon. \_Get it out your mind, Astrid. Why are you so \_bothered \_by this?\_

I really don't have an answer to that thought. Maybe it's because the Dragon just sounded in actual pain, like it was feeling something, maybe because it actually \_is \_wrong to bring down an invincible creatureâ€| But it might have had something to do with the fact that the Night Fury's scream sounded very nearly human.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Hello! Thank you so much for reading my start, I sincerely hope it was entertaining! Anyways, my updating schedule will be a bit vague, unfortunately, but I will try to update every week. Thursdays will work for now, does that sound okay? I might be able to upload on a weekend but my school life is a very busy one so apologies sooner rather than later.<strong>

\*\*Thanks again, and please let me know what you think; review, follow, favorite, whatever. See you next Thursday!\*\*

\*\*\*Okay, so, this is the first chapter to be rewritten, so, just a heads up, the next chapter is going to sound very amateur to all the new readers. I'm currently working on upgrading the quality of the writing and it's the same content, hopefully just better style. Also, I update every Wednesday, not Thursday, this one excluded because I'm in the process of rewriting.\*\*

## 2. How To Live To Tell The Tale

Oh, I was going to be in so much trouble with Gobber when I got back!

But I didn't care. All I was worried about was finding that Night Fury.

There was just one problem. I had been out in these cursed woods for over two hours and I still hadn't found anything remotely close to a Dragon. How hard could it be to find one in all these woods? Okay, point taken.

"Oh, the Gods hate me," I mutter, kicking around a stone. "Most

Vikings have trouble with an axe or a sword, no, not me, I have to deal with an entire Dragon!"

I angrily hit a branch out of my way, and it comes to ricochet back and hit my face.

Luckily, my quick reflexes stop it.

And that was with my left hand, beat that, Snotlout!

I find myself eerily smug, and continue to stumble down the uneven ground.

But something stops me in my tracks; there is red on the ground.

It's blood.

I quickly snatch for my axe, but in my hurried state I realize that I had forgot it. The only weapon I had was a skimpy dagger. Odin, this will be interesting.

I narrow my eyes and take a deep breath. I had hit him, so the Dragon would be injured. All it took was one swift plunge and it was over. My secret would go with me to the grave. Or the end of my humanity. Whichever one came first.

"Come on, Astrid, no turning back," I tell myself.

I step from behind the rock and stare at the sight before me, and let me tell you, it was not a pleasant sight.

Any normal Viking would be mangled, bruised, or dead, but all he had was blood caked down one side of his face. I would have grimaced but then I remembered that it was a \_Dragon \_and I was here to \_kill it.\_

It looked different. He had cleaned up somehow, but his clothes made him look worse for wear.

His black clothing was completely torn. It would have been impossible to tell that he even had a shirt in the first place if not for a: I had seen him just two days ago with one and b: the scraps of black cloth that edged around his shoulders and torso. His pants were ruined but intact, and he wore no shoes. That had to be tough, Berk wasn't known for its cheery weather and sunshine, after all.

The Dragon was on its stomach, its large black wings jutting out from its shoulders were pinned in an uncomfortable-looking position with the ropes, and its claws were dug deep into the ground, as if it were holding onto it for dear life.

If not for the uneven and raspy rise and fall of his chest, I would have thought him dead.

I slowly and cautiously approached him. Maybe I could just...

Big mistake when I chose to look at its face.

The Dragon was actually very scrawny, but most definitely muscular,

as he was a Dragon. His face looked like it was still developing with scatters of freckles. His brown hair was overgrown but not long, with black ear folds protruding where his normal ears should be. His tail stretched back a ways, but it was his green eyes that once again gave me a start.

The way it was positioned said, 'Get away from me,' but the eyes pleaded 'please don't leave me here.'

In all honesty, it looked...terrified.

But that was ridiculous. Dragons don't get scared.

I squeeze my eyes shut and lift the dagger above my head.

"I'm gonna kill you, Dragon," I whisper. "You have to die. No one can know my secret. \_No one can know!\_" I raise my voice and glare at the Dragon.

He moans and stares at me, slowly blinking.

"I have to kill you," I tell it softly.

He blinks again and stares at me, pleading me.

"I have to," I say, hating that I sound almost regretful.

Come on. I had fought hundreds of Dragons in training. This one was just finishing the job. I could do this. I \_will \_do this.

I take another deep breath and raise the dagger.

I hear the Dragon moan again. He sure sounds in pain...

\_End it already.\_

I bring the dagger down.

\* \* \*

><p>I'm not sure what was going on in the Dragon's mind. For some reason, they always fascinated me. But Dragons were Dragons and Vikings were Vikings, they were supposed to hate each other. I had lost my entire family to Dragons, I should hate them with a burning passion.<p>

But the truth is, I only hate them because I'm supposed to hate them. No more, no less.

Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to fly. Would it be worth giving up everything? But how could it? Bonding messes with your mind, that's what I conclude. It tricks your mind into thinking that you're not turning into a monster, that you're becoming something better.

But you are going to turn into a beast. You are going to forget your life, your past, your friends, family, tribe, village, everything. The monster turns you against it all. You go from a Dragon-hating Viking to a Viking-hating Dragon. Maybe that's just the way the world works, but there are some things that you just can't accept.

I didn't want to lose my mind, I didn't ask for this, I didn't want this. I was perfect. But I am most definitely not anymore.

All because of a monster growing inside of me and appearing on the insides of my wrists, contained by thick wool wrappings.

Maybe it's impossible to conquer it. Maybe I'm just fighting a losing battle that I have no hope of winning and maybe I'll just end up hating everything in the world.

Maybe I should just kill myself and give in to, well, everything.

That may sound like a better option to most Vikings, but really, to me, that would be giving up.

I won't give up. I \_can't \_give up.

I can't accept this fate that the Gods have given me, I have to make my own path, because I will not be a monster.

But no matter how hard I fight, it's there. The monster that refuses to fade away. It calls softly to me to give in, to give it myself. To make me forget everything.

And the only way to fend it off is to fight it. Fight it with everything you have.

That's what I was doing.

And it still wasn't enough to keep me from bringing that knife down, not into the Dragon's heart, but into the earth beside it.

\* \* \*

><p>I exhale a large breath and stare at the ground.<p>

\_I did this...\_

How weak they would think of me now. Astrid the Dragon-lover, Astrid the Weak, Astrid the Useless, Astrid, who couldn't kill a Dragon. What would happen? This Dragon couldn't live. And I didn't kill it.

I looked down at it, the Dragon with the human form, and I just couldn't force myself to drop the dagger down into its heart.

Even though it was a beast, it was still \_human, \_despite what others have told me.

I breathe out a sigh, shaking my head.

I cannot believe I'm doing this.

"You got lucky, Night Fury," I whisper, but I can't find it in me to pack my words with venom.

I start to walk away, and I hear him breathing. That had been a lot of blood.

"Astrid, you are gonna get yourself killed," I warn. "Don't do it, don't do it, don't do it..."

Yet, suddenly, I find myself stepping back and snapping the ropes off of the Dragon, freeing his hands, then legs. He really had been bleeding a lot...

With a loud crash, I suddenly felt my back slam into a rock, and rough but abnormally warm hands clasp my throat. I quickly claw at the warm hands, but they don't budge.

I cough out once, but no more. This Dragon will not get the best of me.

I meet its gaze, full force.

That stupid, useless, half-reptile. I save his life and he's going to pay me back like this? Then again, I'm the one who shot him down in the first place.

It stares into my eyes, its own green ones were so close to me.

Its eyes are even more green up close. The slits are purely animalistic, filled with hunger and instinct. We were always told that Dragons could not feel human emotions, that they couldn't think. All they could do was react. But this Dragon was captivating me just with its eyes.

Every second or so, its nose would crinkle up in a snarl, its pointed teeth bared, clearly marking it as something that was beyond the realm of Vikings. This thing, it was not human.

Blood was caked on the side of the Dragon's face from where it had landed, and I almost felt sorry- if it hadn't been a Dragon that was trying to kill me. That fall must have hurt, even with its heightened strength. Nobody was invincible; Dragon or Viking.

How strange that in times like these, I still find Dragons fascinating creatures. There must be something wrong with me, for admiring the beast that is surely going to kill me.

I sigh, giving the monster one last icy cold glare before slouching, shutting my eyes. He would not get the pleasure of seeing my terror as he killed me. Perhaps he would claw my heart out and eat it, or he would blast me into oblivion with one deadly plasma blast from his palms wrapped around my throat.

This is what I get for helping a Dragon...

But then, the hands cooled down, and I snapped my eyes open. What? Was he just going to tear me open? I thought Night Furies loved their plasma blasts. They never missed, after all.

Except...this one had missed. I realized that now. When he had shot me from the skies, I had lived.

No one had ever met a Night Fury and lived to tell the tale.

But if that were so, then how did anyone know about them in the first

place? Perhaps they weren't always mindless beasts. And I was still alive, right? Maybe not for long. Maybe the stories were right.

I look up to find that the Night Fury's eyes had dilated into squared pupils, making it look much less threatening.

My hands were still grasping the Dragon's own, as if I had any chance of prying them away from my neck.

But the Night Fury bends down, and...sniffs my wrist, looking like he was about to paw at my arm wrappings.

Then I get it.

No, no, no, no, no!

My eyes widen with realization, and I start to panic.

"Let me go!" I scream, struggling under his grip.

The Dragon seems startled, and it loosens its grasp around my neck, but I still can't get away.

"Please!" I plead. He...knows. Isn't that enough?

Somehow, my good hand smacks the Dragon in the face, and he bends low and growls in my face with the crazed and wild eyes of a dangerous and wounded animal.

Okay, this is more like the Night Fury one would expect.

Then, the weirdest thing happens.

I shove him in the chest- hard- and a bright flash occurs, blinding me for a split second.

The Dragon cries out, and the weight pinning me down is no more.

The Night Fury roars, pitching itself into the air. His flight is a little wobbly but I don't pay too much attention to it. I'm too busy hyperventilating and freaking out.

That light. Please don't tell me I had just...

No. It couldn't be. I didn't even have my first set of scales fully developed yet. There was just no way I could have done that.

It was just luck, or the Gods finally decided that some good thing should happen to me. Yes, I'll thank the Gods. I can't...do \_that \_yet. Definitely not.

I moan as I pick myself up off the ground. My neck is sore and it must be a little red from being exposed to that heat. Oh well.

Gobber is gonna kill me, I conclude.

But the Night Fury was gone, for now at least, and here I was. Physically unscathed. I couldn't really count my crippled arm on the Night Fury because I had thrown it out ripping my axe from a tree.

So, the worst it had done was make my neck red from the heat of his fire.

Still, I was alive, nonetheless. I lived.

But there is no way I am ever going to tell the tale. I'd rather set sail to Helheim's gate and back.

\* \* \*

><p>"Astrid, lass! Where in Odin's beard have you been?" Gobber demanded the second I walked into the forge.<p>

"Sorry, I...went for a walk and lost track of time," I offer lamely.

"Lost track of time, eh? Then what did you do to your neck?"

"Uh..." How do I explain that one?

"'Uh' alright. You went out to fight Dragons again, didn't you?"

"Guilty," I say, lowering my head, hoping that if I don't look at him he won't be able to read me like a book.

"Astrid, you know your arm needs rest. Get up to bed and go study or something."

"Okay," I nod, but stop at the foot of the stairs.

"Hey, Gobber?" I ask.

"What is it?"

"You don't...happen to have a copy of the Dragon Manual at hand, do you?" I ask hopefully.

He thinks. "Hmm...as a matter of fact, I think I do. Why though? I thought you read it three years ago?"

"Well, three years ago is a long time, I forget things."

Gobber gives me a look. He knows that I never forget things. I was too perfect. But, nonetheless, he must have figured that it was for something of absolute importance, so he took me to the back room and dug up his old copy.

"Here ya go. Don't stay up too late," he advises, handing me the worn leather book, chalk full of notes and pages sticking out every which way.

"You got it," I call over my shoulder, already leaping up the stairs.

When I get to my room, I flop down on my bed and open the pages, delaying a moment so I can just inhale the scent of the book.

Another secret of mine is that I love books. Not quite like Fishlegs,



but close enough. But, books were for the weak, the ones who couldn't fight. So therefore, I couldn't openly show my fondness for books. But I still loved the way they smelled, the way the words took you to another time and place, and how I could escape from my cruel reality just by stepping into a new one, if only for an hour or so.

"Alright, Strike Class, Fear Class, Mystery Class," I murmur to myself as I flip it open. I remember most of it, but I don't particularly remember the Night Fury, which is why I wanted the book in the first place.

"Thunderdrum," I announce quietly, taking note of its placement in 'Tidal Class.' I quickly skim over the side notes, remembering the very pronounced, 'extremely dangerous, kill on sight.' The Thunderdrum that was drawn in the book was rather scrawny, but buff compared to the Night Fury. Its wings were attached to its arms, like the Nadder, but they were slightly smaller and spotted. Another picture showed a Viking Turning into one, with the wings spreading out, the thin, whip-like tail growing in size, and very angry but detailed eyes.

The last picture showed a fully Turned Thunderdrum blasting pure sound waves out of its hands. That's right. Unlike most Dragons, Thunderdrums couldn't produce fire. Instead, they blasted sound waves. That could apparently kill a man in close range.

"Timberjack," I flip to the next page.

More drawings showing a Timberjack Turning. It, too, has its wings sprouting from its arms, but they are so large that almost look too big. They have curled horns coming out from their heads, like how the Night Fury had its ear flaps. The Timberjack could cut trees with its razor sharp wings, but it didn't look all that happy, if you asked me.

Next up was the Scauldron. One of our Vikings had Turned at sea, and into a Scauldron. We lost a lot that day. The newly Turned Dragon had sprayed boiling water at its former tribemates, not even blinking as it disappeared into the sea forever with seemingly practiced ease.

Changewings, classified in the Mystery Class, was another Dragon that we had never encountered before. They weren't as rare as the Night Fury, but they were still nearly as much of a mystery. We knew they spat acid and could blend into their surroundings, but that was about it.

I got impatient and started to flip through the pages, barely pausing to read the titles as they flickered by.

Something caught my eye as I neared the end of the book.

It was a blank page. Well, nearly blank, there were a few words. And they just happened to be what I was searching for.

"Night Fury," I read. "Speed: unknown. Size: unknown. The unholy offspring of lightning and death itself. Never engage this Dragon. Your only chance, hide and pray it does not find you."

I furrow my brow. I had found what I was searching for, but it didn't give me what I wanted. It then hit me just how little we knew about the Night Fury.

I don't know. But something happened that forbid me from killing it. It was like I literally \_couldn't kill it.\_

Would I regret it later? Probably. But for now, all I had to go on was that the Night Fury was still out there. Maybe I could find it. And do what I have no idea, but Vikings aren't exactly known for their strategical thinking. Besides, I'm more of a traditional take-it-down-with-an-axe-then-lop-its-head-off kind of girl anyways. But I knew, at the very least, that I had to do \_something.\_

I thumbed my scales through my arm wrappings, biting my lower lip.

If I didn't, I risked what little future I had left.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Wow, thank you guys for all the positive feedback! It makes me really happy! And I know that this is a totally random day for me to update, but I won't be able to update this Thursday or this weekend so here I am! I'll definitely have another chapter up on the Thursday after this one.<br>\*\*\*

\*\*And I can't believe it, 25 followers for one chapter?! Wow. This did better than I would have thought. Thanks again and please review! They make me happy:)<br>><strong>

\*\*Until next time, I hope you're enjoying my story as much as I am!\*\*

### 3. How To Survive A Dragon Maze

Dear Odin if I don't find this Dragon soon I am going to kill myself. What am I doing? I hate Dragons!

And yet, here I am, looking for the most deadly one in the middle of the woods, the very same one I couldn't kill, who also knows my secret...

I really need to think of better tactics.

"Useless half-reptile," I mutter, kicking a stone with my foot and swiping at nothing in particular with my axe. It had probably flown away, why was I even out here?

I grumble some more, feeling particularly sorry for myself as I search for things that I have a feeling I won't find.

Then, I notice a drop right behind a boulder.

"Hmm..." I twist my mouth in a quizzical way.

I follow it down, and it leads me to a cove that I didn't even know

existed.

It's peaceful. There's plenty of places to hide, with a big lake in the center, a few trees dotting the edges. It's very nice, actually, but it's not what I'm looking for.

"Well this was stupid," I complain.

Well, it took about two seconds for the gods to prove me wrong.

Something very dark shot out of the corner of my eye, making me flinch back.

What would you guess, it was the Night Fury. He was beating his wings as hard as he could, which was a little strange. His eyes held an interesting glow, a certain dead-set determination that even the best Vikings strive for. He didn't seem to know how to use his hands, though, as he kept grasping for rocks but slipping.

He falls as I'm in the middle of thinking, slowing his descent down by gliding unstably on his jet black wings.

So this is the acclaimed Night Fury, real and in the flesh. And I'm here, just observing it, and it's not attacking me, it's in its natural habitat.

Somehow I thought it'd be more...terrifying, frightening, threatening, I don't know, \_something \_other than blindly hurling itself at a cliff.

"Why won't you just...fly away?" I wonder out loud, barely whispering.

His nose snarls and his teeth bare. He growls in frustration, something to remind me that he's definitely a Dragon, and shoots a plasma blast with a flick of his wrist in annoyance.

I don't know how, but that's when I see his tail.

Something even more confusing, I feel like I want to throw up. Even from this ledge, I can see the dried blood on the left side of his tail fin... or, where his left tail fin \_used \_ to be. Why does this bother me? The Night Fury's grounded, he's as good as dead and I won't have to kill him. I should be overjoyed, thrilled, ecstatic. Happy in some way, at the very least. But all I feel is sickened.

Sorry. I feel sorry for a Dragon.

I glance down at my arm wrappings, subconsciously tugging on them, willing them to be tighter. Is the Dragon I'm Bonding with showing up in more ways than I previously thought? No. It can't. Because I'm Astrid Hofferson and Astrid Hofferson is \_not \_ weak.

But Astrid Hofferson is supposed to hate Dragons, too.

I snarl to myself, louder than I anticipated. It gains me the attention of a certain grounded boy with wings and unnatural green slit eyes.

I widen my own crystal blue ones in shock, but only for a moment.

My eyes settle back into their usual stormy gray-blue glare when it wears off.

"What do you want?" I hiss at it. The Dragon crouches on its hands and cocks its head at me, daring to look, shall I say, curious.

It warbles, lifting a hand. His hand glows blue for a moment before something loud and bright comes right at me. I instinctively cover my head with my hands, but the plasma blast hits directly above me. Only a few pebbles come loose and fall into my plaited hair.

That's twice that it's shot at me, and missed. Just now, he could have easily aimed, fired, and hit dead on. But it didn't. It shot a deadly flame of plasma at me, and missed. Perhaps just to show that it could.

But why would it miss when it always hits its target?

The Night Fury continues to stare at me, and is now balanced on all fours with his crippled tail wrapped around his feet. I furrow my brow, trying to search for signs of attack, certainly not to avoid catching sight of that Thor-awful tail of his...

Its gaze unnerves me, so I get up and walk away.

Perhaps just to show that I can.

\* \* \*

><p>Why did that Dragon have to be so confusing? Again, if I haven't mentioned this already, that was the second time the Dragon-who-didn't-miss missed.<p>

Why was this eating me up? It literally made no sense. I shouldn't care about any Dragon, period. Let alone a Night Fury. Oh my gods this is way to confusing. Vikings are simple people. We fight, we eat, we train, and we fight some more. Our minds aren't made for these types of things!

No, but maybe Dragons are...\_

I suck in a breath at the thought. I am not a Dragon.

Strategical thinking is something that's always been something that's come easy to me. I'm actually pretty scrawny, so strategy is all I have. I try to gain weight like all the other Vikings, or, at least to the point where I can't touch my fingertips when I wrap my hands around my waist, but to no avail. I have muscles, obviously with all the training courses I take, but sometimes it's just not enough. Of course, Dragons were incredibly strong. Take that Night Fury, for example.

But I am not a Dragon.

I quickly glimpse at my arm wrappings. My wrists are dying in the heat of the forge as I sit by the coals, waiting for Gobber to come back.

I am not a Dragon.

I sigh and look back at the coals. When I was little, I used to find figures in the coals. I used to be able to see great Vikings going to war, flickering away before they ever reached, or warriors battling fearsome creatures. Now all I could make out were Dragons.

I am not a Dragon.

\_I'm not one of them,\_ I tell myself, but I'm not even one hundred percent convinced that I'm not just telling myself that to ease my worries. All because I couldn't get the end of that thought out of my head, the one the beast stirring inside of me whispered.

I'm not one of them.

\_Yet.\_

\* \* \*

><p>"Alright, everyone, Gronkle training today!" Gobber yells, light and chipper for having just announced that we were going to be training for death.<p>

Tuffnut, Ruffnut, Snotlout, and Fishlegs all groan. Eret's the only one who doesn't complain.

I'm not allowed to practice, 'because crippled Vikings make an easy target,' so Gobber says.

"Gronkles. Why Gronkles?" Fishlegs mutters from down in the ring.

I want to tell him that they are slow and untactful, relying on strength and fire power instead of brain and tactic, but for one, that might make it seem like I was actually showing interest in the other teens and not just watching because I wasn't allowed to practice and two, I'm sure he already knew.

"Alright, remember, today we are working on solo fighting. It's every Viking for himself."

The arena was set in a maze-like structure. I'm pretty sure he did this as well on the second day of training. That had been fun (not). I had nearly been trampled by a Deadly Nadder. Not one of my most happy experiences, especially when I was afra- er, hated those ones.

I grip my axe hard, waiting for Gobber to unleash the beast on the waiting kids. I want to argue that I'm good enough to be down there training as well, but as much as I hate (and I mean absolutely \_hate\_) to admit it, my broken arm begs to differ. So I'm stuck standing outside the ring, observing. Gobber smiles, and I wait for him to pull the lever on the Gronkle's cage. But, instead, he wanders nonchalantly over to the edge of the arena, shutting the gate behind him and coming to stop right beside me.

"Uh, Gobber?" Snotlout calls warily.

"Now, surprise! All of the Dragons are coming out today! Remember;

every man for himself. Alright, have at it!"

All of a sudden, Gobber pushes down a lever that I'm sure none of us have ever noticed before now and every single Dragon we keep around for training is suddenly free from their cages.

"Are you crazy?" Fishlegs demands, running around like a chicken with its head cut off as a Hideous Zippleback zeros in on him with a smoke breath.

Now, there's this weird thing about Zipplebacks. They aren't like any other Dragon known to Viking.

Ancestral Zipplebacks were one Dragon with two heads, one to breathe toxic gas and the other to ignite it. Nowadays, to be claimed by a Zippleback is rare. Because an Ancestral Zippleback will Bond with two people. The two have to work together to cause chaos. Zipplebacks will often be mates. They can leave one another, but if they can't find another "head" then they're just half of a Zippleback, half of a Dragon. I remember this one Zippleback Stoick had killed long ago when I was seven. I had seen it numerous times. It was wild borne, meaning that it didn't come from a Viking. Like the Night Fury. I'm sure we all would remember if something like that turned in the middle of the village. But anyways, the Zippleback had been a gas breather. Its humanity was female. She had long, deadly claws and her wings were slightly torn. But she had been seen with several different gas igniters. That was how we learned that Zipplebacks could move between partners. The Dragon was a common enough species that there were a variety of unchosen partners or mates so Zipplebacks were rarely grounded.

Oh, did I mention? Half a Zippleback, half a Dragon. Zipplebacks had to be a complete Dragon to fly, meaning that they had to have one gas breather and one gas igniter for them to fly. As Gobber always says, a downed Dragon is a dead Dragon.

Hmm...I wonder...

I am distracted when one of the Zipplebacks notices me, just standing there outside the ring. It growls at me.

It turns to the second "head" and through a series of clicks and growls, the second head turns away from Fishlegs who was previously attacking it with a hammer, and they both lock their eyes on me.

"Come on," I jeer from above. "Didn't get enough last time?"

One of the heads has a black eye, and it hisses in memory. To actually hurt a Dragon is not an easy feat. I'm sure it's easy to kill a Dragon (because I wouldn't know...) but to hurt them not kill them? That's a whole different feat. For one, they're a lot tougher than the average Viking, and their skin might as well be granite. It took a lot of force to give that stupid Dragon a mark let alone a black eye.

The gas breather shoots out a stream of, well, gas, and the gas igniter does its job. I tumble out of the way, cursing the Dragon(s) and raising my axe but by the time the remains disperse they're gone.

"I hate Zipplebacks," I mutter to myself beneath my breath. Not quite as some species of Dragons, but they're definitely not my favorite. Somehow, I feel like the Zipplebacks were giving me the middle finger.

They probably were. Or, something akin to it in Dragon.

I lean against the bars with my axe pointed downwards, watching everyone. I could probably beat everyone in the arena except maybe Eret. But Eret didn't seem like he was too interested in fighting Dragons anyways, so that left a clear open road for me.

Why he didn't want to was beyond me, but hey, to each his own, right?

Plus, Dragon training gave me unlimited access to the Dragon Manual, and I could study the one Gobber gave me every night.

Snotlout acts all brave to the Gronkle, but the she-Dragon inhumanly growls and blasts a ball of lava from her hands, scaring him off in less than a second.

I sigh. If only he could run that fast \_towards \_a Dragon.

The Gronkle's fire seemed a bit more forced and practiced, where the Night Fury's had been effortless and easy.

For some reason, I keep thinking of that Night Fury a lot, too.

Like, \_a lot, \_a lot.

But, like all the other times, I shove the thoughts away and tuck them in the back of my mind, the best I can do. My arms itch almost painfully but I ignore that too.

How come some Dragons didn't kill? The Night Fury didn't-

Oh, that lasted about three seconds, a new record!

Then, a deathly Dragon steps into view, shaking out their scales and fluttering their wings.

I freeze on the spot.

It's a Deadly Nadder.

\_Show no fear, this Dragon will not best you.\_

I narrow my eyes, but I'm worried that the fear hasn't quite left yet. When I'm attacking one of them, sure, easy. But it's the in-between part that has me cowering. I can't help but see my parents' death in this purple creature before me. Okay, well, the Nadder isn't \_really \_purple, but his scales and spine tips are. If Vikings could think Dragons as beautiful, I'm sure Nadders would be the closest definition, but we are Vikings. We only find swords, knives, axes and clubs beautiful.

And war. Lots and lots of war.

I sigh again, glaring at the Nadder with all the hate I could muster. Which, being a Viking, was a whole awful lot.

Ruff and Tuff come running around the corner. I'm almost certain that a part of Tuffnut's hair was on fire but from this vantage point I couldn't be sure.

The Nadder growls and steps towards them, raising his hands. If he weren't a Dragon, it would have looked like he was surrendering. But he was, and this Dragon was far from surrendering.

"Look out!" I call, against my will. But to my dismay, the twins seem in shock, and they don't move.

I mentally groan and look glance at Gobber. He's distracted with watching Eret save Snotlout- yet again.

Always up to me.

The Nadder's hands begin to glow an unhealthy red, and just as he's about to summon a blast of pure magnesium- the hottest fire known in the Dragon world, mind you- I slip between the rails and gracefully dive down eleven feet with practiced ease.

I use my axe to knock the Nadder's hands away, pointing them at the ceiling. The fire shoots out and sends sparks raining down but it doesn't even make a mark on the chainmail that keeps the Dragons from flying away.

The Nadder seems to scream. Not in pain, more in fury. And I suddenly realize I'm less than five feet away from my most hated enemy.

I growl right back at it.

\_Show no fear, this Dragon will not best you.\_

With a small grunt I swing my axe (the flat part, of course) to the Nadder's face, whacking him square in the cheek.

He gives a small shriek once more. He looks pained, but he's not even bleeding.

"Stupid Dragon," I shout, filled with anger.

The Nadder then perks up.

The other teens have now come to see the show.

"There are other Dragons in this arena, muttonheads!" I remind them before darting away, leading the Nadder away from them. The Nadder won't be the biggest problem, all I have to do is outsmart it (which this is probably the hardest Dragon to outsmart, but I'm still smarter because I'm Astrid) and watch the spine shots. The Monstrous Nightmare is quick, but it's not very good at strategy. All the Gronkle's good at doing is bowling things over. I hate to admit it, but I think the Zippleback will be the biggest issue. Two "heads" are more dangerous than one.

I push ahead, thanking the gods that Gothi gave me a splint and not a



whole arm wrap (don't need to explain that one, hopefully) so I am still maneuverable. I dart past the maze, using the only advantage I have; I know how to think like a human.

The Nadder is quick and light on their feet, but even these Dragons have difficulty with their human aspects. Sometimes they don't understand emotion other than hatred or they'll stumble clumsily on their two feet, and I don't even think the former Vikings who have Bonded remember how to use their hands.

And so, of course, the Nadder rams into the side of one of the maze walls, sending the whole thing down like dominoes.

I curse beneath my breath but keep on running because, to be quite honest, it's the only thing I can do. Somehow, I end up vaulting onto the tops of the maze with the Nadder in what little air it can fly in behind me. Now the Nadder is at full advantage; it's in the sky, and I am on a falling ground.

I moan unhappily, watching for the other teens.

I see the other teens madly running around, avoiding those unnatural fangs and claws, and the wings that fan out behind them.

Eret's just barely managing the two Zipplebacks, but they keep striking relentlessly, showing how closely they are related to a viper.

I just need some way to get them all together, maybe we could focus them on each other and not their next meal. All we needed to do was get them back in their cages.

Would this work? Well, let's find out.

"Fishlegs!" I call, still running on the quickly toppling maze walls.

Fishlegs looks up from the hammer he's grasping for dear life, momentarily distracted.

I dive once again, this time headfirst, and come up with a clean summersault, ending up right next to him.

"The Gronkle," I say. "Keep it occupied, get a shield and make some noise."

He nods a little shakily, but follows my orders nonetheless.

"Ruff, Tuff!" I shout. The look up from ripping each other's throats out, and look at me.

"Help Eret out," I tell them.

"But it's every man for himself-"

"I don't care! Every man for himself is not going to work for all these Dragons. Just work together and we can get them back in their cages!"

"Whatever," they each murmur, but they don't hesitate to run in,

throwing daggers at the two Zipplebacks who look mildly intimidated by the new couple.

"Snotlout!" I call out next.

"The Monstrous Nightmare, make a lot of noise and shouts, back it off, pretend to be the bigger Dra- er, Viking. Just make it confused!"

"On it," he agrees, calling out curses that I had never even heard before. To my surprise, (I mean, what? I totally knew that would work!) the Nightmare growls and takes a forced step back.

"Alright, Nadder, just you...and..."

Why do I get the sneaky suspicion that it's right behind me?

I slowly turn around.

"...you."

I snorts through its nose, cackling. The darn Dragon seems like it's laughing.

"I don't have time fore this!" I say, swinging my axe wildly but with dead precision. My axe hits it in the face again and it cries out, lifting off to fly to the chainmail ceiling.

"Alright, now that that's taken care off," I dust my hands off and run back through the rubble and broken maze walls to find the others. Now that they actually were told to do something (aside from Gobber's firm belief of learning on the job), they were actually holding their own fairly decently.

"Corner them!" I order, swinging my axe at the Zippleback who just leaped at me.

I hiss along with it, but in pain. Being hyped up on adrenaline has done me good so far, but now that I was slowly backing up the Dragons, it was fading quickly and I could feel the pain of using a broken limb.

In all fairness, I was saving my fellow classmates, does that count in anyone else's book but mine? No? Okay.

One at a time, we zeroed in on the Dragons, forcing them in their cage with all of our fury combined.

In no time at all, all that's left is the Nadder still clinking its wings against the metal every time it beats its purple wings glittering in the sunlight.

I step on the handle of a hammer sticking out of the debris and aim. I throw it, and of course it hits the Nadder dead in the chest.

I would feel sorry for its fall but I had heard a Night Fury's scream as it fell from way, way, way higher than fifteen twenty or so feet, with its wings and body bound so its fall was only sped up. At least the Nadder could use his wings to slow the fall.

As soon as it's downed I run towards it, placing the end of my axe against its throat.

The Nadder looks up at me, and all the hatred in my eyes vanishes.

It no longer looks terrifying. It only looks terrified.

I sigh and move my axe away from the bewildered Dragon.

"Nice job, guy, but next time-"

"Astrid look out!" Eret cries, and quick as a thought he tackles me down to the ground.

Just in time, too. The Nadder's fire shot simmers down to a black burn mark in the spot I had just been.

Gobber bursts into the arena, looking outraged.

"I'll take it from here," he growled, punching the Dragon in the face with his no-really hand that's really a makeshift hammer.

That had to hurt. Gobber dragged the dazed Nadder back to its cage and locked it up tight.

"I-I'm sorry, Gobber," I stammer, hastily picking myself up. I did give Eret a hand. He did save my life, after all. Twice (I think through gritted teeth).

"Well done, Astrid," he says, completely surprising me. "But next time I say stay out of the ring, \_stay out of the ring.\_"

"Sorry, Gobber. I know that tis was supposed to be a solo training thing-"

"What? Oh no, that was just to get you all to see that working alone does not work. Every man for himself is not something you all need to want, you hear?" Gobber says, waddling through us and wagging his finger (on his real hand).

"It's why Berk thrives; because we work together. Teamwork is the only way. Otherwise we run around like chickens with our heads cut off."

I smirk to myself, wondering where in the world he could have gotten \_that \_idea...

"But also, another lesson. Never, \_ever \_turn your back on a Dragon. They cannot be trusted. And they always..." he looks right into my eyes. I quickly look down. "\_Always...go for the kill."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Crud it's not Thrusday. I am so sorry for skipping yesterday, I have literally been going through my day today thinking that it was Thursday. Sorry about that. I had every intention in mind to update Thursday, and I thought...yeah...<strong>

\*\*So anyways, you're all probably wondering when in the world is

Astrid gonna meet officially meet Hiccup, and I promise you it will happen next. And I'm sure that 99.99% of you can predict the first sentence of the next chapter ;) I just hate those stories where it's a retell (of the sorts) of the movie and they rush everything, so I'm trying to take the pace a little slower. I understand if it's agonizingly painful but that's just the way it goes. I like details, okay? Don't judge me!\*\*

\*\*Thank you all again for coming back to read more and see you next Thursday (the real next Thursday, haha...) or sooner!\*\*

#### 4. How To Teach A Dragon Personal Space

"...So why didn't you?" I ask out loud, lifting up the heavy part of the discarded bola I had somehow managed to re-find.

I once again twist my mouth, as if searching for an answer.

I wonder if the Dragon is still there.

\_This is a bad idea, \_my conscious warns me, but, as always, I don't really listen.

\_Your funeral.\_

\_I'm already dying.\_

I freeze when I think that. Bonding with a Dragon is sort of like dying, I guess. We wouldn't really know, we never had the mind to study them any further than the Dragon Manual and Dragons couldn't exactly speak.

But I wasn't going to Turn. Maybe I was Bonding, but I am not going to turn. I've held it back this much I can hold it back all the way.

But what I didn't remind myself of was that each day I was growing more and more wary of what I might and could do.

The cove is peaceful once again. It'd be a nice place to rest. You know, if there wasn't a Dragon laying in wait for you.

I slowly creep down to the boulders where I peer down into the cove. I don't see the Night Fury, which is a little strange.

Spoke too soon.

All of a sudden, a large black figure burst out of the water, giving me a heart attack.

It's one thing to have a monster burst out of the water. It's another thing for a \_real \_monster to \_literally \_burst out of the water.

I can tell you that it wasn't the best experience of my entire life.

I sit still on the boulder, waiting to see what he does.

Once again, I get a pretty decent image of the Night Fury, and my

reaction confuses me even more.

I guess from swimming in the small lake, all the dirt washed off, so he's clean now, aside from the blood still caked on the side of his face. His black clothing is completely tattered, and I think he must have ripped what little remains of his shirt that had been left off sometime. Now that I was actually looking at him, he wasn't so much as scrawny as just lean. I can see slightly toned muscles from here, that I assume would be more defined if he hadn't been starving for the past few days.

And that made me feel bad.

But why in the world would I feel bad?

I think he was fishing, but either way, he comes up without a fish. He growls and throws another plasma blast in frustration, but he looks weak, like the effort of attempting to get food had strained him.

His hair is long and slightly shaggy, dripping in his face from the swim.

He looks quite pitiful, and once again I can't help but feel sorry for this creature.

He's beginning to- no, he is- starving.

He could use some food. He needs food. He will die if I don't help this Dragon.

I sigh, picking myself up from my crouched position, not quite yet believing what I'm about to do.

\* \* \*

><p>Maybe around an hour later, I manage to steal a fish, a shield, and walk through town with my axe strapped to my back and all of these goods with me, and I don't get questioned.<p>

The day is hot, which is unusual for Berk. Normally it's either storm clouds threatening to rain or storm clouds dumping everything they've got. I think you get the picture.

I scout a way to get down into the cove without having to jump down from that ledge (which I could have done! I'd just...you know, rather not...) and peer out into the cove.

The Dragon isn't in sight. Did he fly away?

Of course he didn't, stupid, I remind myself. You tore his tailfin off. He'll probably never fly again. A downed Dragon is a dead Dragon.

I sigh once more and throw the slippery (and disgusting) Icelandic cod out into the open. Nothing happens.

Maybe he's hiding.

I turn the shield sideways and slip between the two boulders.

I pick up the fish again and slowly turn around as I walk, looking for anything out of the ordinary.

Of course with my luck, a small grating sound comes from behind me. I turn and am face to face with the Night Fury.

Okay, so not really face to face, more like face to crouching-on-a-really-high-boulder, but same thing,, right?

I freeze up just slightly, the Viking in me failing miserably.

\_So this is what the fearless Astrid Hofferson does when she faces the ferocious Night Fury?\_

\_I'm not here to kill it. I'm here to feed it. Odin's beard I must be going mad. But I've survived this beast's encounter. Twice.\_

That I'm still alive fills me with a miniscule amount of self courage, and it's just enough for me to awkwardly thrust the fish out towards it and raise my shield.

"O-okay," I say shakily. "Here's how it's gonna go. I'm gonna give you this fish," I raise it slightly just so maybe, if the gods are feeling particularly sorry for me today, the Dragon would understand that this was its meal, not me, "and you're not gonna kill me."

Looking at this, it must seem silly. I mean, the boy has to weigh like, ninety pounds (okay, \_not\_ including the wings, tail, and everything else) and all he has going on are the creepy Dragon body parts. But I know better. Dragons are dangerous and you should never trust them.

The Dragon snorts, and I can only hope it's in agreement.

He slowly climbs down from the rock, tilting his head at me, as if scoping the situation out, as if \_I'm \_the more dangerous one.

I take a deep breath and keep holding the fish out.

I cringe when he slowly approaches. The Night Fury leans down, somehow making it seem elegant and graceful in a way that I could never achieve, and opens his mouth, wide. Is he going to...grab the fish with his mouth? If it were in any other situation, I would have laughed. I guess when Dragons forget everything, they really \_forget everything\_, including how to use opposable thumbs.

"Easy," I warn as he gets uncomfortably close.

He stops approaching and growls, a deep rumble that sounds way more natural than it should.

"What?" I demand, but not with the usual sternness everyone knows to expect.

He snarls, bringing his lips back in a threatening sneer. He's staring at...

"Oh, no," I argue. "I get to keep \_that\_."

He's staring at my axe. No doubt, he thinks I will attack him. Heck, I probably would, too, if I were in his boots- er, feet, or, claws, or, I don't know, this is taking way too much thought process!

"I won't hurt you, I promise," I tell him firmly.

He doesn't appear convinced.

"Look," I say, getting frustrated. "Do you want the fish or not? If I get rid of my axe, here, then I will be completely defenseless. You're a Dragon, even though you're not armed you could still kill me. So it's kind of fair, if you ask me."

Of course he didn't but I don't keep that in mind. But the stupid Dragon refuses to step down.

I groan.

"Fine, how about this?" I ask. "I'll get rid of my shield. Shields are more important to us Vikings, so you're hurt and weak, I don't have a shield \_and \_I'm crippled, too, so I need some means of defense if you decide to eat me. Sound fair?"

He makes a sound that I've never heard from a Dragon before. It's sort of like a growl, but it's not. It sounds like something a Viking would say. Like they're agreeing to something they really don't to. Either way, I hope the Dragon has come to some sort of consensus.

I drop the shield with a pronounced thud. He growls again and shakes his head, as if to say, \_get rid of it.\_

I roll my eyes and bring my splinted hand to rest on my hip in annoyance, but nonetheless I shove the shield with my foot as far as I can. It slides really far. I wouldn't even have time to run and grab it if the Night Fury were on the other side of the cove.

I turn back to him and raise my eyebrows, shifting my weight to one foot to look even more ticked off.

\_ 'Happy?' \_I mentally ask, as I'm starting to feel silly talking to a beast that I don't even know if it can understand me or not.

He snorts.

\_ 'Not really, but I'm hungry and you have fish,' \_I imagine him saying back.

He proceeds to approach now, still leaning down to retrieve the meal with his mouth.

By some miracle, or some twisted irony, I just happen to notice his teeth.

They're completely normal.

Dragons have fangs as well. They don't protrude out from their mouths like the Ancestral Dragons, but how else could they rip into raw meat? The Night Fury's teeth are completely flat, well, not completely, they're just normal. They look just like any Viking's

teeth.

"Huh," I say out loud. "Toothless. I could have sworn you had Dragon-"

He cuts my spoken thought by opening his jaw really, \_really wide, \_and then the Dragon teeth that were missing appear, chomping down on the fish and bringing it to the ground so he could gobble it down greedily. I flinch and instinctively yank my arms back.

"...teeth," I finish, still in a defensive position.

My hand starts to sting a little and I realize that in his fit of being faced with food in the start of starvation, one of his fangs had nicked my hand.

I wipe the small trickle of blood off on my skirt and look back at the Dragon.

He had eaten the whole fish, picked clean the bones and had probably eaten some small ones as well.

Talk about ravenous.

He notices me staring at him and stands once again, making a purring sound in his throat that I can't quite decipher as 'content' or 'threatening.'

I back up, momentarily (and idiotically) forgetting about my axe.

"Uh, no, no, I don't have any more," I say quickly. I manage to trip stumbling backwards and the Dragon corners me against a rock.

I lean as far as I can into the rock, starting to panic just a tiny bit.

"Um, I... I promised I wouldn't hurt you, please don't turn against me. I did get you that fish. If you kill me, I can't bring you any more," I try to reason with it.

He flicks his head. If I didn't know any better I could have sworn it was in amusement, but I do and I know he's probably not amused.

Well, I haven't gotten killed yet, that's a plus.

I still avoid glancing at his tail.

Even though the swim for fish in the lake washed the dirt off of him, it didn't do too much for the blood.

I grimace in sympathy.

Even though the Dragon has cornered me, now I feel like it's the one who feels in danger.

"I'm...sorry about that," I choke out. I don't apologize to anyone, let alone a Dragon. But I feel like in this case, he kind of deserves one.



\_Kind of deserves one? You shredded half of his tail!\_

\_Okay, maybe really deserves one.\_

It should unnerve me that I'm feeling sorry for this Dragon, but I've already come to terms with it. That's what scares me more than anything.

The Night Fury is really close now.

And when I realize just how close, a new feeling arises in me, other than panic or sympathy.

I don't really recognize it, it's not something I've ever felt before.

\_You stupid girl. You're embarrassed,\_ my brain supplies me.

Holy mother of Thor, am I \_embarrassed \_because the stupid Dragon doesn't have a shirt?

I really am losing it.

No. I'm not embarrassed. Astrid Hofferson does not get \_embarrassed. \_I'm just a little uncomfortable, that's all.

I try to tell that to the heat quickly rising in my face but to no avail.

Whatever. Again, uncomfortable, because I do not get \_embarrassed \_and I certainly don't \_blush.\_

However, I do make a side note to bring the poor boy some clothes the next time.

Only because his old black clothing had gotten torn to shreds and it couldn't be easy in this Berkian weather. Of course, he could summon fire from his hands... But that's irrelevant, right?

The Night Fury crouches down in front of me, and takes a sniff of the air.

Why would...?

His eyes dilate into slits, and that can't be a good sign.

He stares at me, and I'm captured in the Night Fury's gaze.

His eyes are an unusual emerald green, a very vibrant and lively shade of emerald green. They're flecked with gold and his pupils are slits, just like any Dragon's. But just the fact that they aren't yellow, they're green, somehow eases my mind in some way unfathomable to myself.

For the first time, I wonder about what I will look like if I Turn. Would my eyes be terrifying and deadly, yet mesmerizing and maybe- just maybe- beautiful like the Night Fury's? Or would mine be a cold, expressionless, and ugly yellow like all the other Dragons' eyes I have seen?

I snap out of it when the Night Fury lowers his head to sniff the inside of my wrist, the one that's not in the splint.

"Hey, um, Night Fury? I kinda need that, I mean, I only have one left," I don't really think that will do anything.

But then he moves to paw at it.

He doesn't get far before I remember my axe.

I tear my hand away and give a ferocious growl myself, reaching behind me with my good hand to grab it (which is not an easy feat considering my right-handed self just had to go and get her right hand broken).

"I promised I wouldn't hurt you but if you hurt me then I won't hesitate," I warn in a low voice. I put every single ounce of the ferocious shield maiden I am into that voice, but somehow I know that that's not what scared the creature off. It must have been something in my eyes. He must have seen that whatever was on my arms was not something he should see and that I would die to protect it.

He must have either respected that or known not to mess with an angry and determined female, Dragon or Viking. It must have been the latter, because, again, Dragons can't really think like we can.

He growls softly and takes off into the air. It would have been a lot more intimidating if he hadn't crash-landed on the other side of the lake, grumbling as he picked himself up.

The Night Fury is still grumbling but he must have gotten more energy from eating a little something as he easily blasts the ground in a small circle before curling up on the steaming ground, aiming to take a nap.

I stare at him in part confusion, part wonder.

Okay, I'll have to admit, he did look a little cute when he curled up on the ground like that.

He had wrapped his tail around himself and was snuggling it like it was a Viking blanket.

I hold back laughter, but I guess I failed, as he shoots his head up and glares at me.

\_'How dare you interrupt me, I was trying to nap you stupid Viking.'\_

\_'Oh, I'm sorry. Please continue on with your cat nap.'\_

\_'No point now. You ruined it.'\_

Apparently, my imaginary conversation was pretty accurate, as the Night Fury gets up, grumbling pointless nothings and sending me glares every few steps. I bite a chuckle.

I sit around the cove for a while, just enthralling in the fact that I was actually in a confined area with a Night Fury and I was still

alive.

It's starting to get dark and I really need to get back soon, but the funny thing is I don't want to. I actually like it here, even though we both keep our distance.

I sigh and walk over to a nearby tree. Just as I'm about to break off the sturdiest twig, I sense a presence breathing down my back. Oh, wait, no. More like I \_feel \_a presence breathing down my back.

I jump away a little.

Darn that Night Fury he's taller than me, I realize for the first time. I have to look up.

He isn't threatening me. He's only watching me. It seems almost like he's observing me.

Well that pesky Dragon needs to learn some personal space.

\_ 'Watch the personal bubble!' \_I glare at him in my mind, thinking what I would say out loud as I had come to do. And in turn I would imagine what the Dragon would say if he could talk.

\_ 'What is this personal space you speak of?' \_he would ask.

\_ 'Oh forget it, you useless Dragon.' \_

\_ 'Whatever. Stupid Viking.' \_

\_ 'I heard that.' \_

\_ 'Good, you were supposed to.' \_

I get out of hand and snort out loud, and the Dragon looks at me in confusion.

"Sorry," I say aloud, reddening (for the second time that day!) and quickly snap off the twig, hurriedly rushing back to the rock I had been resting on.

I keep my head low, making pointless scratches in the dirt. I couldn't draw very well anyways and I had no hope with my left hand, so all I could do was scratches.

The Dragon follows, once again breathing down my neck (and making me very uncomfortable, but I keep making scratches just to show that he doesn't scare me). In the corner of my eye, I see him follow the movement of the twig with his head, not with his eyes. Something an animal would do in wonder or fascination.

He then moves to stare at my hand, firmly clasped around the twig. And it's only going white because I'm concentrating, certainly not because of the Night Fury behind me.

He blows out through his nose rather loudly and trots off. He's probably going to go hang upside down and nap like he did earlier.

Night Furies napped a whole awful lot for being the most feared

Dragon out there.

But, to my surprise, he comes back with a twig of his own.

He holds it like it's a snake and will bite him, or maybe like a toddler who doesn't know how to hold something would. Which I suppose, in a way, he is. He doesn't know how to climb, otherwise he'd be able to get out of this cove.

But then how did he get in that tree? Then again, he could still fly then, and he can use his hands for clawing into things for grip.

But then he sticks the end in the ground like I did and moves it back and forth.

I watch in amazement as two curved lines suddenly get a flat nose, two oval eyes, and a shape.

Soon enough, I'm staring at a very good drawing of an Ancestral Night Fury.

Or, what I assume is one. The Dragon has the same shape of eyes (well, the best I could figure out from a scratch picture in the dirt) and he has the same ear flaps.

The Night Fury nods in satisfaction and turns to me, grinning. He looks very proud of himself.

\_'Look what I did!\_'

I smile in amazement and stand.

We stare at each other for just a moment.

I can't describe that one moment. It's like something just clicked. We were no longer the deadly Dragon and the vicious Viking. We were just a Dragon and a human. And in that one moment, there was nothing wrong with that.

It gave me a feeling I could remember but couldn't name. I know that I had felt it at some point, a long time ago, perhaps, but I couldn't put a name to it. It's on the tip of my tongue and I'm sure I'll drive myself crazy trying to think of it, but I just can't remember it.

Then the Dragon winces and I get a clear image of just how much blood is caked on the side of his face.

No matter how many times he dunks himself in a lake that blood isn't going to come off unless somebody helps him.

And of course there is no one around but me.

\_'Hold on a minute,'\_ I tell him in my mind.

If he doesn't have his shirt anymore, then that means the scraps of whatever kind of fabric it was must still be here somewhere, and if they were, then I could...aha!

I find the scraps by the shore of the lake. I take the biggest one

and soak it with water, bringing it back to the Night Fury while it's still dripping.

He looks at me warily, shifting from foot to foot.

I know he's a Dragon, but that has to be cold on his bare feet. I dismiss the thought and go back to wondering how in Thor's name am I going to get close enough to wash the blood off.

"Hey, there, toothless," I say calmly. He doesn't appear to appreciate my ironic nickname.

He snorts and backs away a little.

"Hey, you've got blood on your face. I can help you clean it off, okay? But you have to trust me."

The Night Fury stares at me, making me feel like I'm trying to communicate with a barrel of fish.

I sigh, pointing to the black cloth which is way softer than what I would imagine.

"I can use this to get this," I then gesture to the side of my face, "off of you."

He looks thoughtful.

'How do I know I can trust you?'

"Are you serious? I've been here all day and I haven't done one thing!"

He stares at me like I'm crazy. Which I probably am. Imagining a Dragon speaking to me just because I'm bored and stalling going back to the village.

He nods his head at my axe, which is still strapped to my back, and hisses.

I sigh.

"I can't get rid of it," I say firmly.

He lowers his head and glares at me.

"Look, if I...give you my axe, will you let me clean your face? It's the least I can do." I cannot believe I am actually offering to do this.

He thinks for a moment before looking at me again and nodding once.

I cautiously step towards him, keeping an eye out for any tell tale signs of attack. I don't find any.

I get about three feet away before I slowly reach back and draw my axe out.

He flinches at the noise, but he doesn't shy away.

I reluctantly hold it out in my left hand.

He cocks his head at the axe, and starts to lean down.

I pull it back.

"Grab it with your hands," I demand.

\_'My what?'\_

"Your hands you useless Dragon," I say, pointedly flexing the finger on my left hand.

The Dragon stares at my fingers in total awe before attempting to mirror my movements.

It's really weird and actually quite funny to watch a Dragon try to use their hands. Especially if they'd never been taught before. This one is wild borne, so I don't expect him to know anything.

I set the hilt on the ground and use my splinted arm to perch it up.

Then, I flex my fingers again.

"Watch," I order.

I slowly reach out to the handle and firmly grasp it, not loosening once as I bring it up to hold it out to him.

"See?"

He sniffs it, but all the same, he reaches out for it.

When he grabs it, he holds it like at any moment it might attack him.

"But I want it back, that's my mother's," I tell him.

I don't expect him to care, let alone comply. But what he does takes me by surprise.

I would have thought he would have thrown it in the lake, somewhere in the depths where I could never retrieve it, or blasted it to shards with one hand tied behind his back. But instead, he gives me a look with his eyes that I could not have imagined him saying better.

\_'Okay.'\_

He turns and carefully sets it on the ground a few steps away.

I just stand there and gape at him, the cold cloth making my hand go numb.

He gestures with his head. \_'Get on with it already.'\_

I shake my head, as if clearing the little memory of him giving me a fully one hundred percent human gaze from my mind.

"Sit down," I suggest.

To my surprise, he does. He settles on the ground and sits cross-legged, looking up at me.

\_He's trusting me,\_ I think.

I sit down in front of him. I'll have to lean forward but it's better than getting any closer.

He closes his eyes when the cloth touches him, but I can see him tense.

I don't say anything as I scrub at the dried blood.

Even dried, it's a bright, vibrant red. So alien to our kind. But it's still red, and that somehow makes it...more acceptable.

"Alright, done," I announce thankfully.

I shoot up and let the now-red cloth flutter to the ground. He stands up as well, slower this time.

\_'Thank you, that was beginning to itch,'\_ I imagine he'd say.

\_"It's no big deal."\_

He turns his gaze down to my wrists, which I notice that I was playing with.

I feel heat rush to my face and I cling to my right wrist with my left hand, praying that he'll go away.

He doesn't.

He uses the new skills of 'grabbing' I had taught him, and cautiously reaches out.

I don't know why, but I let him take my one hand. The left one, of course. Somehow he knows that my right is crippled.

Ever so slowly, he unravels my arm wrappings. Fast learner.

I suck in a breath when my scales are revealed to the evening air.

He stares intently at them for a really long time. He only stares at them for, like, three seconds, but it feels like three years.

I draw them back, hastily covering them back up as quickly and skilled as I can.

\_'You're Bonding.'\_ he would state plainly.

I redden in shame. I'm sure he doesn't understand why I am so upset by this, and how could he? He was already a Dragon, and to him that must be the best thing ever.

"I'll see you tomorrow...Toothless," I add, just because I know it irked him once before and I hate the silence and the seriousness that had quickly settled in the moment that he had unwrapped my scales.

"Stupid Viking," he narrows his eyes. "I have a name you know."

I smile.

"Please, do inform me what it is?"

He rolls his eyes, something I'm sure he picked up from me.

"It is most certainly not '\_Toothless.\_'"

"Whatever," I laugh. "See you."

I go to grab my axe and he doesn't stop me. I then turn and walk away.

He calls out just before I disappear.

"My name is Hiccup."

I smile.

I get halfway back to Berk before I jerk to a stop in realization of four very important things.

The first; the Night Fury hadn't talked as a figment of my imagination, he had actually talked. Out loud.

The second; I talked back to it. And he understood me.

The third; I had turned my back on a Dragon. The very same thing Gobber had literally just told me today to never, ever do with a Dragon.

And the fourth, the one that should scare me the most but for some reason didn't; I did the last two things as if they were the most natural thing in the world.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>And so she finally meets Hiccup! Sorry if I made revealing her scales really rushed, it was supposed to be short for dramatic effect but I think it just came out rushed...oh well.<strong>

\*\*But yay! She finally met him! And I love how it takes her a while to realize that he was actually talking out loud. I also love how his first words to her are (quote/unquote) 'Supid Viking.' :) Yes it's early for another update but I promised updates at least every Thursday and I have blown that off three times now, so hope this makes up for it? See you next time!\*\*



Oh my gods, the Night Fury \_spoke.\_

What do I do? Do I stay away? Do I go back?

Come on, I have to go back, I promised I would. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Sometimes I wonder if that Dragon's trying to make my life miserable. But I suppose it's not his fault I'm Bonding and just happen to not be able to kill him.

I furiously scratch at my scales in my room, once again sifting through the Dragon Manual. These Night Fury pages are empty, which don't really surprise me, but still. Maybe I can get him to draw something for me, he did pretty good at it in the dirt...

\_"Stupid Viking."\_

So the Dragon knew how to speak. That's a first. But how is he able to speak? Can all Dragons speak?

I grumble and push my charcoal pencil back and forth on my desk. I attempted to doodle something in the Night Fury pages but I can't draw to save my life.

\_"I have a name you know."\_

Maybe the Night Fury was special, so that's why we don't know anything of them. All I knew was that they were super rare and dangerous. So far, all he had done to me was learn my secret and accidentally scratch my arm. And stare at me. And talk to me. And- you know what? It's not important.

\_"It is most certainly not \_'Toothless.'\_"\_

Who knew Dragons were so temperamental? Oh, right. I'd have to sneak some clothes for him, as well. Maybe I can visit after training. That would be good. I can bring fish and his clothes and maybe ask a few questions. Bring paper, but not the Dragon Manual. He would probably be offended by the things in there.

"Astrid," Gobber knocks, making me jump.

"Oh, hey, Gobber," I say awkwardly and totally unsuspecting-like. Because I'm just talented that way. But I really have nothing to hide, it's not like I have evidence of the Night Fury, and my scales are tightly secured in their wool arm wrappings.

"Time for the bonfire, dinner time. Stoick wants to talk about another search. Let's see how this goes."

"Yeah, okay, whatever," I wave him off, smiling to show that I heard and gesturing him to leave. It's a good thing I was normally a sour patch for people entering my room, as he doesn't question when I silently ask him to go away.

I sigh and fall back in my chair.

This bonfire is going to be a blast. Not.

\_"My name is Hiccup."\_

Right before I head out, I pause for a moment to wonder who, be it Dragon or Viking, in great Thor would name their child 'Hiccup.'

\* \* \*

><p>"One more search, before the ice sets in," Stoick insists, slamming a dagger down on a point on the large map. We had all finished dinner and had moved to the Great Hall, where Stoick was now talking about another search party. Which never usually went well.<p>

I had personally never been on one, but I had always thought they would be a good learning experience. Now I'm not so sure.

"Most searches never come back."

True, very true.

"We're Vikings, it's an occupational hazard!" Stoick argues with the random Viking.

I think back to Tooth- I mean, Hiccup, and wonder what kind of Viking I am. I'm a Viking, so I must be somewhat crazy. I didn't have a crazy streak in me, just a violent-by-nature one. Crazy seemed to skip a generation with me, as I never felt the need to inflict pain upon myself to feel joy (like some people), or inflate my entire being with egotistical dreams (like some other people). All I wanted was to be the best. I always assumed crazy just wasn't me.

I suppose the gods had to prove me wrong somehow, yet again. The only way for me to help out this Night Fury is to resolve to all 'crazy' possible.

"Now who's with me?" Stoick calls, but barely anyone raises their hands.

I know he'll be able to get volunteers somehow, seeing as he's the chief and all, so I slip out the giant doors (which is a very difficult task that I have mastered over the years) and quickly dart along to the docks.

I don't know why I choose to go here, maybe the sound of the waves soothes me.

I want to pray to the gods, but even if they did hear me, I'm sure they wouldn't help me. Not only do they seem to have a personal vendetta against me by making my life suck in every way possible, but there is no way they would help me with this crisis.

If it were up to them, I'm sure they would rather have the Night Fury eat me. One less Dragon to worry about, right? They wouldn't want me helping a Dragon.

I sit down cross-legged, leaning back on my arms and staring up at the moonlight. It feels nice. I can almost understand why the Night Fury enjoys the night. It's quiet, peaceful, and filled with solitude. Lots of Vikings are afraid of the dark when they are young, but I never was, and I still am not. I don't know why, just the dark

never scared me.

The dark was where the mysteries were, and where the unknown lay hidden in wait. It's where the monsters and the Dragons thrive, patiently awaiting for the moment you have your back turned to pounce and devour you whole, and there is no way to protect yourself because there is no sight.

But the dark is also where we dream. And my dreams mostly include what I wish my life was like. It's not all that bad to be in the dark. Specifically because no one can see you. You don't have to be perfect, you don't have to be a great warrior, heck, you don't even have to be human. All you have to be is you.

I would never admit this, but that's all I've ever dreamed of.

Sometimes I wish the night could last forever. I mean, sunshine's overrated, and we don't get any anyways, so what's the difference. The dark can be scary, but that's just facing your fears, and we Vikings are all about that. I wonder if there are ever Vikings who would shy away from a beast as terrifying as the Night Fury.

\_Yes, oh so terrifying with his cute ear flaps, human-like teeth, and the way he curls up with his tail.\_

\_Shut up. He's terrifying, okay?\_

Growing up, I always waited for the moment when I would become a true Valkyrie, a real shield maiden, and when I would bring my family honor. My uncle Turning shook me up, and I realized that I never wanted to feel that helpless to help anyone ever again. But now I feel like I am. But the only person I'm failing is myself.

My scales burn, but I bite back a grimace and shrug it off. I'm not stopping it. It's only getting worse. And I'm getting more scared by the day.

I'm not supposed to be scared, by the gods! I'm not supposed to want to cower in fear and my life isn't supposed to end like this.

But would it be so bad to be a Dragon? To be able to fly away from all my troubles and attack anything that stood in my way? Being a Dragon doesn't sound all that bad when I put it that way, but I have hopes, dreams, ambitions, that I have sworn to follow. Plus, this whole deathly-hate for Dragons doesn't help the matter.

I sigh and get up, glaring at the moon for being so bright and constant.

\_It \_never changes, it's always there and it doesn't have to worry about being anything else, all it is is the moon and nothing more, nothing less. It doesn't have expectations to abide by and codes and Bonding.

If reincarnation is possible, I would like to think I would come back as something important. But the truth is, if I do come back, all I'd want to be is a cloud, or something. Something that everybody looks at everyday, but they don't care what it is or what it's doing because it's an inanimate thing and inanimate things don't have

thoughts or feelings.

Or maybe they do, they just don't have the ability to voice them.

On second thought, I'd rather stay in Helheim, where I'm bound to be after all of this is over.

\* \* \*

><p>"Hey, Toothless," I mock, cautiously stepping into the cove. I shoulder a large basket filled with fish. I figure a Dragon eats more than the average Viking so I came prepared.<p>

I also brought with me a small knapsack with fresh clothes, some paper, three charcoal pencils, and my axe slung across my back. I didn't bring a shield, but I'm hoping I won't need it.

I hear a swooping sound behind me, and I turn to find the Night Fury.

"I hope you appreciate all the trouble it took for me to get you these things," I say, eying him.

I'm debating on whether or not he'll be friendly today, or if he'll disregard all interactions as of yesterday and kill me. But his eyes are largely dilated, so I think I'm good.

He looks happier, more excited. It's amazing what one fish can do to a puny Dragon.

"So, I brought you a big basket of fish, and some clothes. And you seemed to like to draw so I brought some stuff for that. What are you looking at?"

He grins.

"...You can still talk, right? That...wasn't my imagination?"

If possible, his grin gets even larger, and he shakes his head.

"Okay, good. So I'm just getting the silent treatment?"

"The what?"

Even though I know he is capable of speech, it still throws me for a loop.

"Um...never mind. I, uh, brought you, this stuff." I point to all the things I had dumped on the ground, and some fish tails stick out of the basket.

"Food!" he calls and dives in, ripping into raw fish and sorting through the pile.

"Yeah, I brought you some fresh Icelandic cod, some salmon, and even a whole smoked eel."

He freezes and narrows his eyes, curling his lip up in a snarl.

"A what?" His voice is suddenly deep and dark, sending a shiver down my spine.

"Um, what's wrong?"

"D-did you say an eel?" he asks again, but he sounds different this time. Like he's hiding something.

"Yeah. What's wrong? Did I- oh," I cut off in realization. "You're afraid of eels, aren't you?"

He snorts disgracefully. "I am most certainly not."

"You are," I try my hardest, but I can't help a small smile creep onto my face.

"I am not."

"You are."

"Am not."

"Are, too."

"Am no- oh my Alpha get that \_thing \_away from me!" he shrieks, shying away about eight feet from the yellow and black eel I had subtly raised in his line of sight.

I snuff out the sound of my laughter and put on a straight face.

"Hey, it's okay. I don't really like eels much, myself," I try to console him, as I want to remain on friendly terms. I throw the eel as far as I can into the cove, wiping off my hands on my skirt. "See? All gone."

"Are you sure?" he sounds wary, but he's hungry enough that he slowly approaches the basket of food.

"Yes. I'm sorry. I didn't know that you were afraid of eels," I say honestly.

"Most Dragons are," he grumbles, as if unhappy about the fact.

He sits and scarfs down one fish in about ten seconds, quickly moving on to the next.

"So..." I start. "Your name's Hiccup?"

"Mm hmm," he mumbles through a mouthful.

"That's quite the...interesting name."

\_Gulp.\_

"Yeah, yeah, laugh all you want. I didn't name myself, my mom did. And either way, it's a thousand times better than 'Toothless,'" he snaps his jaw closed, with his Dragon teeth fully visible. "That's just an insult to my ability."

"Of course. Hiccup."

He takes another bite.

"Ss wh's yerr nm?"

"Come again?" I ask, as I can't understand him with a mouth full of fish.

"What's your name?"

"Oh. It's, um..." Should I tell him? Is it wise to tell a Dragon your true name? But then, he told me his. And he hasn't killed me. So I guess that means we're friends.

"Hiccup is actually my real name. My mom named me that, I swear."

I stare at him. It's like he read my mind.

"It's Astrid," I tell him.

"Hmm, 'divine beauty.' An appropriate name."

I curse the fact that a wave of heat rushes to my face. So what, he just basically called me 'pretty.' That is what my name means, so why am I getting all shaken up?

I don't know why, but all of a sudden, I feel a little self conscious. Hiccup- though he has a funny name- is strong, a Dragon, obviously smart, and could beat me in a fight. I'm not going to lie, he is maybe the tiniest bit handsome. Just a little bit. But he's a Dragon so it shouldn't matter. But for some reason it does and all I can think about is how plain I must look in my simple brown Viking skirt, black leggings, thick winter boots, blue striped shirt, shoulder pads and arm wrappings. I'm not really eye-catching, in my opinion, so I normally don't care.

So why do I now?

I clear my throat and push my golden bangs out of my face. I want to direct the attention somewhere else, so I turn the focal point back to him.

"So, you're mother. There are more Night Furies?"

His mouth stiffens and twists in a thoughtful way.

"No. As far as I know, I'm the only Night Fury out there."

"Wait, sorry, I'm confused. How does that-"

"Each person is different. So of course, they're going to Bond with a different Dragon. My mom is a Stormcutter, and I don't know what my dad was. My mom said he died, but he was a great Dragon. I don't think he was a Night Fury, though. What kind of Dragon you Bond with isn't based on genetics, but who you are individually."

"How does that work?" I ask. To my surprise, I am quite intrigued by what he is talking about.

"Ancestral Dragons were a bit more...territorial. Mostly, they either traveled solo or stuck to a group within their own species. Us Dragons today are still half human, so we are naturally sociable creatures. So we stick together, mostly."

"Cool," I say, but more to say something than anything. "So, Dragons can reproduce with another Dragon that is not the same species?"

"Yeah," he replies. "My dad certainly wasn't a Stormcutter, and I know lots of Dragons who have different species Dragons as parents."

"Oh," I say. "Hey, I brought you some new clothes, just like I promised."

"What's wrong with my clothes?" he asks sincerely, furrowing his brow at his pants.

I snort, but then cover it up because I'd still rather remain polite. "You don't even have a shirt anymore, your pants are shredded at the bottom and there's no way you can be comfortable with no shoes."

"I have warmth," he smiles, raising his hand upwards and igniting a miniature blue bonfire on the palm of his hand.

I look away. "Please don't do that."

"Why? Because it reminds you of what you are about to be able to do?"

I snap my head up and glare at him. I hate that he takes on my iciest glare with a look of pure curiosity.

"I am not going to Turn," I tell him firmly.

"Yes you are. It's already starting. I can sense it. Besides, what else would those scales mean?" he gestures to my wrists, and I snarl at him.

"Shut up. I'm not going to become a \_Dragon.\_"

"You say that like it's a bad thing," he sounds almost offended as he unfurls his tail, making a scratching noise against the earth.

I sigh. "I'm sorry. But it's just that Vikings hate Dragons, and they aren't supposed to Turn."

"But they do all the time," he points out.

"True," I admit, "but Vikings still hate Dragons."

Hiccup pauses.

"Then," he says thoughtfully, "I suppose you aren't a Viking."

"What did you say?" This time, it's me who sounds offended. But I don't care. Even from a Dragon, the words sting. I've worked too hard at this.

"You don't hate me."

"How do you know?" I ask, but I don't sound like I mean it, not even to my own ears.

"Because you came back."

I stop and stare fixedly at one point in the ground. I have always known just much this Dragon depends on me. He knows I won't kill him, but he's stuck here and I'm the only one who can help him. But it suddenly occurs to me that maybe- just maybe- he had been afraid I wouldn't come back. That I would leave him to starve. He doesn't know how to use his hands, he'd be stuck here for all eternity. But I can help him.

And he was smiling because I had come back.

"I don't hate you," I say honestly, which comes as a surprise as I realize that I really don't. "But I'm still a Viking."

"Whatever you say." His tone is doubtful, and that's what worries me.

I change the subject.

"I brought you some clothes," I say, and get up to hand him the knapsack.

"Okay," he sighs, and looks into the bag.

"Look, your clothes now aren't going to help you. Winter is coming and whether or not you can shoot fire, you're gonna freeze. Just be happy," I say, fed up with grumpy Dragons.

He warbles and paws at the pile of clothes that he dumped out.

I sigh, shaking my head.

"Hands. Fingers, separate, use," I remind him, flexing my fingers as example.

"Right," he reciprocates the movements experimentally before going back to the clothes uncertainly.

"Useless half-reptile," I mutter.

I don't see his left ear flap twitch.

"I heard that," he announces without looking up.

"Um...sorry..." I say awkwardly.

"Whatever," he waves it off. But then I catch something just under his breath.

I could have sworn it was, "Stupid half-human."

I cross my arms. "Did you just say what I think you said?"

He looks back, successfully holding the green tunic.



"What?" he asks, a little too innocently. Where in the world did this Dragon learn sarcasm?

"Go behind that rock and change," I say, ignoring his remark for the time being.

He wasn't being serious, try not to take it to heart, I tell myself.

"Why?"

I mentally do a face palm.

"Because...well, you're \_changing.\_" Gosh darn it doesn't this Dragon know anything?

Okay, stupid question.

But then again, how did he know about the terms we use? Like Bonding, Turning, and such...?

For another time, I suppose.

"Changing?" he asks.

"Seriously?" I respond, really not wanting to explain.

He still looks confused.

I sigh. "You don't...change clothes in front of someone else. \_Especially \_if it's a...female."

I swear I was as bright as Gobber's ridiculous reindeer nose he always wears for Snoggletog.

"Oh... Why?"

"Oh my gods, Hiccup, just go change behind the rocks!" I shout, pointing him away.

He smiles, amused, but obeys.

Suddenly, I realize something, and I feel like an absolute idiot.

"Wait, Hiccup! The shirt doesn't have-"

But he walks out with the new outfit, and I can't say I'm not surprised. He actually looks \_good.\_

All I could find that would possibly fit him was a long sleeved green tunic, a fur vest, some long brown trousers, and a thick belt, but he pulls it off pretty good.

But how did he get his wings through the shirt?

"... How did you-"

He puts his finger to his lip and smiles deviously. "Shh, it's a

secret."

"Well, I suppose I have enough of those. What's one more?" I ask sarcastically.

He laughs, and I once again marvel in the fact that I'm talking better with a Dragon than I do with any other Viking.

I can't explain it, but it's like all of a sudden we're just friends. Not enemies anymore, but actual friends.

I also can't believe that I find myself to be okay with that.

Well, like I said. I have so many secrets. What's one more?

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Hey, so I'm actually updating correctly! Sorry it was kinda suck-ish in this chapter, but it's late and I'm procrastinating my homework...which I should go do now...<strong>

\*\*Anyways, I will try to update again before next Thursday, but if I don't, see you all then! And thank you for the lovely reviews! They make me happy. :)\*\*

## 6. How To Un-Down A Dragon

"So, how are these clothes helpful?" Hiccup asks, tugging at the sleeves.

I sigh. "Because they give you a lot more warmth than what your other clothes would give you."

"But I \_liked \_my other clothes," he grumbles, clicking in a Dragon-like way.

"Well, get over yourself," I mumble.

He shoots a glare at me, dilating his eyes slightly.

I look down.

"Um, sorry," I choke out.

Here's the thing; I don't like apologizing to people. I'm not good at it either. But when there's a Dragon in front of you and your axe is laying uselessly on the other side of a cove, not to mention if your right arm is broken and you're freaking \_right handed, \_I'd rather swallow my pride and give the Dragon an apology.

But that son of a half-troll breaks into a large and toothy grin.

I fold my arms and glare at him through narrowed eyes.

"Not funny. You could at least, like, you know, \_not \_act like you're going to threaten me?"

He stops laughing. His smile is gone, but it takes a moment longer before the amusement fades.

"I am sorry, Astrid," I startle a little when he actually uses my name, but why I can't possibly imagine, "but I won't hurt you. I promise."

The mood had turned serious, and I find that I don't like it. So, I show one of my rare humorous sides and attempt to pick the mood up.

"Well, I'd promise the same thing, but I don't know if that's a promise I can keep."

He catches the playful tone, and smiles.

"Great! Just wait until you can fly," he jumps up and down like an energetic toddler, and forcing my eyes to follow his enthusiastic behavior.

"Do Dragons age the same way Vikings do?" I ask randomly when the thought comes to mind.

He pauses.

"Um...yes, I do believe so. But added health benefits, so we don't die of disease or starvation."

"Figures," I mutter under my breath. Of course Dragons would be better than Vikings. Why wouldn't they?

Oh great, I just admitted that Dragons were better than Vikings. Okay, maybe it was through some heavily veiled sarcasm, but I still had thought it. And that was not okay by Vikings standards.

"So, tell me about Vikings," Hiccup asks, diving back to the rocks and propping up on one.

"You are a little energizer bunny," I murmur, but I wander over and sit down a few feet away from him.

"What do you want to know?" I ask. He opens his mouth, but I cut him off. "And don't say 'everything.'"

He promptly closes it again.

"Fine," he says instead, "tell me about why Vikings hate Dragons. I never understand that one."

"Oh, that's easy, it's because-"

I cut myself off.

It seems like that would be such an easy question to answer, but to be perfectly honest, it's kind of a difficult question. Why do we hate Dragons? What exactly did they do to us that was so terrible, every single one of them deserved to be written off as a dangerous character? To be perfectly honest, I don't really know, and I'm not even sure that any other Viking could answer that.

I purse my lips, searching for an answer.

"Well, why do Dragons hate Vikings?" I ask.

To my surprise, Hiccup just shrugs. "Beats me. I wouldn't know."

"You...wouldn't know?" I repeat slowly.

He shakes his head. "No. I don't hate Vikings. My mom does, so I could ask her..."

I instantly feel guilty. Hiccup might never be able to see his mother again. And it's all my fault. He can't fly. He can't get away. My fault. Because he knew my secret.

I mean, we were friends...right? Were we friends? I don't know. I wouldn't exactly think of him, I think it would be more of a mutually intended term when we really thought about it, but I don't know if he would trust his life with mine willingly, I sure wouldn't.

If you think I'm being a little rude, think of it from my perspective. Sure, he hasn't killed me, and by now I highly doubt that he will, but he still could. And I'm a Viking. It's in my blood to hate Vikings (for reasons I still can't figure out, but I'm just supposed to, okay?). It'll take more than two days to turn my opinion around.

Hiccup trusts me with his life because he has to. It's not an option, it's a choice.

"I'm sorry, Hiccup," I tell him sincerely. "You'll never be able to fly again, and it's all my fault."

I hang my head down low in shame. Look at me, I'm supposed to be a Viking. I'm supposed to be strong, merciless, and fearless. And now I'm feeling shame because I downed a Dragon.

I can't find it in me to care.

"Astrid, I..." But not even Hiccup has anything to say to that.

"Why don't you hate me?" I ask quietly.

But, being a Dragon, he hears it.

"I don't know. Because you didn't kill me? Because you came back?" he offers.

"That's not...reasonable!" I exclaim in frustration. "How do you not hate me? I ruined your life! Don't Dragons hold grudges? \_Why \_don't you hate me?"

He looks a little taken back by my sudden outburst, but his eyes soften when I rise to meet his.

Blue on green.

Pupils on slits.

Viking on Dragon.

"Astrid," he says again slowly, as if he's just testing out my name.  
"I don't hate you."

I stare down again, defeated. Just in those words, I suddenly know that it's true. He doesn't hate me. Obviously.

"You know what, let's just...not talk about it," I finish weakly.

"Want to talk about Dragons?" he asks, sensing that my world was a bit of a sore subject.

"Sure," I smile weakly.

I hate feeling this vulnerable. I wouldn't dare show this much emotion in front of another Viking, so why would I want to do it here? Something about Hiccup makes me feel like I'm not quite as strong as I think I am, but it's okay.

But the thing is, it's \_not \_okay.

"Actually, I need to go," I announce, standing up.

"Oh, okay," Hiccup seems almost...disappointed? I shrug it off and go over to grab my axe.

"I'll bring you more things tomorrow."

"Okay," he says. Nothing more. Nothing less.

"Maybe tomorrow I can teach you to draw," I offer.

He brightens up a bit, and nods.

"Bye," I say and turn around without looking back.

\* \* \*

><p>I don't really go back. I don't feel like it. I go to the woods and throw my axe around because I need to feel like my old self again, and I need to feel in control. Control is something that I've always had, and to have it suddenly ripped away by the thing I should hate most is a little shaking.<p>

I grunt as I heave the axe into the tree. It lands with a \_thunk,\_ but somehow, I feel like it's no longer satisfying.

The axe buried in the dead center of the tree, exactly where I aimed, just reminds me of what I can do. I can do this. I can be perfect, dead center, flawless. I can do all of these things. Odin's beard, why would I give that up?

I wouldn't. That's what. I wouldn't and I couldn't.

Even if Hiccup seemed like something new from my slightly dreary but totally predictable life, I can't risk it. I've worked my entire life for the future I have now. I'm already walking down that road. Hiccup is just a small pothole in my road. That's all. The rest is smooth, as if it were paved over with tar, and hardened to perfection.

\_That's \_who I am. And no Dragon, whether or not he's friendly and makes me feel just the tiniest bit of freedom, can change that. I won't let it happen. Not as long as I stand.

I angrily stalk over to the tree and rip it out.

I suddenly remember that I had been throwing with my left hand. And I'm not left handed.

I smile. I don't miss. Even when I'm handicapped. Because Astrid Hofferson is perfect, and that's all I ask.

I look down at the handle, and my smile fades. My arm wrappings are just a cruel reminder of how unperfect I am. These stupid scales appeared, and everything changed. I became even more distant, angrier, and trained harder. I could mask it, I was positive.

How stupid of me to even consider that becoming a Dragon wouldn't be so bad. It would be bad. It would be throwing everything away and leaving my perfect road, all for something unknown. It would be veering off and simply thrusting myself headfirst into the woods on either side of me, brushing through a random path that nobody had ever gone down before.

I don't want that. It scares me.

Normally, anything that scares me, I face head on, glaring it down with an axe in one hand and a shield in the other. But in this case, even I can admit that some things are better off unknown.

Helping Hiccup, I had already gone too far off my path. How can I help him and get back on the right track?

\_A downed Dragon, is a dead Dragon...\_

He couldn't fly again because of his tailfin. If I could somehow fix it...

Yes. That's it! Of course, how could I not see this? I can help Hiccup, \_and \_get back to my rightful path!

I throw my axe over my shoulder and race back to Berk. Tonight would be another late night, but this time it would be in the forge.

\* \* \*

><p><em>Clang!<em>

Yes, this is perfect. A great idea, really. Hiccup will be able to leave and I'll be able to get this weight off my chest.

\_Clang!\_

Of course I'll have to get his word that he'll never tell a soul about my secret...

\_Clang!\_

But I'm like, seventy percent sure that Dragon's word is worth

something, right? Besides, I don't think Hiccup will tell. I hope.

\_Clang!\_

But this will work. Sure, most of my inventions have gone haywire before, but the bola worked, did it not? Maybe a little \_too \_well but it worked all the same.

\_Clang!\_

"That should do it," I smile proudly, setting the hammer down and pushing the metal rod in some water. Smoke rises out of the water and fans out in my face.

After I finish the rod, I quickly cut out some leather and attach it to the metal frame I had already made.

Hmm...I didn't make measurements...I hope this will fit. But it has to. The sooner we can get Hiccup back in the air the sooner we can go separate ways.

I smile and close the new prosthetic tailfin, setting it down on the desk. And I don't even acknowledge the fact that I'm excited to see Hiccup tomorrow.

\* \* \*

><p>With the tailfin tucked under one arm and a basket of fish slung over my shoulder (no eels, of course), I stumble down to the cove.<p>

"Hiccup?" I call softly.

No Night Fury in sight. I swear if he's-

"Hi Astrid."

"AAH!"

I screech and drop the fish, glaring at the laughing Dragon.

"I. Hate. You." I declare, standing back up.

"Ooh! Fish!" he exclaims and literally rips open the basket with claws.

I sigh. "Hands," I remind him.

"Sorry," he says through a mouthful.

"Whatever," I dismiss it.

He shrugs.

I whistle (very subtly, I might add) and pray that he doesn't notice the strange contraption under my arm.

"Don't mind me, I'll just be back here, minding my own business..." I murmur, darting my eyes back to him every now and then. Mother of

Thor does that Dragon eat fast.

I quickly get to attaching his new tail. Just my luck, it fits. It might need a few adjustments here and there. I guess Hiccup's so occupied he doesn't notice me back here. Which is all the better.

"Well, a little rough around the edges, but, it'll do," I say to myself, happy that it fits.

"What are you...?" Hiccup asks slowly. I turn to say something, but he's staring at his tail. His eyes dilate into thin slits.

"It's just...oh no, Hiccup, don't-"

But it's too late. I can see something shift in his eyes. He feels the tail. It's not like it's bad, or is scratching at him, or he just hates anything that has Viking (which is obviously not the case as he's still wearing the green tunic, pants, and vest), but I can see it. No, it's not that something feels \_different \_to him, it's that something feels \_right.\_

With no warning whatsoever, he hurls himself in the air. Which wouldn't have been so bad, as he'd only fall into the lake, if he hadn't had a certain blonde-haired Viking clinging to his tail.

"Whoa!" I cry, attempting to push my stomach back down my throat as he flies for at a vertical angle for just a few seconds.

The feeling of calm lasts for maybe half a second before he starts to fall back into the cove and my stomach leaps into my throat once again, threatening to empty itself if it doesn't stop, like, \_now.\_

Somehow, my hands control themselves and I shift forward so that I can wrench open the tail.

The falling stops and he instead soars over the lake.

"Yes! It worked!" I exclaim, cheering to myself. "I did it!"

Hiccup suddenly notices that I'm stuck to his tail, and his eyes dilate back into more normal sized pupils.

"Astrid, what are you-"

"\_Hiccup, fly!\_" I screech, as in noticing me, he happened to forget about flapping his wings.

He curses something that I don't quite catch, but it's too late. We are thrown head first into the lake.

He quickly resurfaces, his face slightly red.

"Astrid, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean- w-why are you...?"

He starts to apologize when I come up sputtering out water, but then he notices that I'm not actually choking, I'm just laughing.



I can't believe it worked! Well, I can, obviously, but still!

"Oh my...Great Odin, it worked..." I gasp between breaths.

"What are you talking about?" he asks, confused.

"Hiccup, you flew!" I shout, jumping up and cheering.

"I did?"

"Oh gods, you useless half-reptile, yes! You did! I made a new tail and it worked and-"

I sink back under the water for a moment and Hiccup drags me back up, swimming both of us to the shore with swift grace and ease.

"It worked. It really worked," I start laughing hysterically once again. What is wrong with me?

Okay, that was a rhetorical question, don't even think about answering it.

"So...you made me...a new tail?" Hiccup asks in amazement, lifting his tail in front of his face in wonder.

"Uh huh," I say, smiling as he observes the tan leather. "I'll have to teach you to operate it, but I'm sure we can work something out," I add proudly.

"You are amazing, thank you!" he says, finally seeming to grasp that he'll be able to fly again.

"Don't worry, we'll get you back in the air," I promise, meaning it.

Hiccup chuckles and looks at me.

"Really. Thank you," he says.

I smile and nod, suddenly feeling awkward. So yeah, we can get him back in the air. Then it'll be back to concealing for me. I can make this work. I can and I \_will.\_

"I-I'm gonna leave the tail here with you, but, don't mess with it, okay?" I tell him, and he agrees.

"Alright," I say, trying to fill the strange feeling with something-anything. "I'll see you tomorrow, Toothless."

He rolls his eyes but doesn't say anything.

"Sorry about your basket," he says, cringing when we walk over there.

"It's fine," I say. "I'm gonna take your tail off now, okay?"

I look back at him and for some odd reason, he's grinning. I narrow my eyes. "What?"

"Nothing," he immediately says, but a hint of the smile is still

there. "And okay."

I tilt my head at him, but I don't comment. Instead, I undo the straps to his leather prosthetic tail and drag it over to the rocks.

"Okay," I mutter to myself. "Let's just take this one step at a time."

"See you later you stupid half-human," Hiccup says, smiling again.

Something in the way he says it doesn't make me freeze with fear. It feels like more of an...what's that they call it? And inside joke? Maybe. But for some reason, I don't find it insulting anymore.

"Bye," I respond, "useless reptile."

He grins cheekily and turns to go.

I'm almost out of ear shot when I hear him call out, "I told you you don't hate Dragons!"

What was that supposed to mean? I ponder it all the way home.

It isn't until I get to my room and start going through my Dragon Manual that I realize what he meant.

My axe lays leaned against my bedroom wall, untouched since this morning.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Aww, she's trusting him more and she doesn't even realize it! I just love Hiccstrid, I think they're the cutest couple. No offense to you Merricup shippers...but Hiccstrid is waaay better. Haha, moving on now.<strong>

\*\*As some of you have noticed, if you have your PMing abilities on, then I will answer your review if you have a Fanfiction account. So thank you all for reviewing!\*\*

## 7. How To Fall In A Lake (Multiple Times)

\*\*\_Hiccup's Flight Record\_\*\*

\_Day One\_

\_After the first test flight, we now know that the tail does work, but it needs someone to control it. Teaching Hiccup to use his hands is a lot harder than I would have thought. We made no progress in two hours, so we resolved to using his appendages instead of fingers. I suppose if you had never used your hands for, oh, fifteen years, it would be a bit overwhelming. How old is he, anyways? I should probably find that out...\_

\_Back on topic. Today, I brought a string of rope. I at first tried to attach it to his leg. Something about his tail and positioning

didn't work, and he just ended falling in the lake.\_

\_We tried this several times, but it all ended with that useless Night Fury dragging his sorry butt out of the water.\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day two<em>

\_We tried his wrist this time, so he still wouldn't have to use his fingers. The rope seems to get tangled up with his tail every time when it's on his wrist, and it messes him up. Plus, pulling it open sometimes is a little harsh. Hiccup fell in the lake a total of two times because on the second time he tore the tailfin and now I have to fix it.\_

\_No progress whatsoever.\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day three<em>

\_So...wrist is a no. He keeps falling in the lake! I'll admit, it is quite amusing but all of those mild calibration issues keep adding up, and I can't think of any other way than for him to be able to use his hands to reach down and shift...gears, or positions, or something. I'll have to take it back and add some additions, and maybe some blueprints so he can study them. Sorry Hiccup, but you're just going to have to use your hands.\_

\_Hiccup is also learning to read and he just complained about having to use his hands. Is it bad that I pushed him back in the water?\_

\* \* \*

><p>I close the small leather bound journal and stuff it back in my sack.<p>

The Night Fury comes gasping and sputtering back to the shore, once again dripping wet. I hold back a laugh with much difficulty but I can't help the smug smile that crosses my face.

He glares at me and growls softly, but I've come to learn the difference between threatening and...well, not-really-threatening.

"I \_just \_dried off," he whines, shaking his hair out of his eyes and flapping his wings.

The movement sends showers of droplets towards me and I end up having to wipe water out of my eyes.

"You'll live, Toothless," I say in annoyance, drawing out a hunting knife to sharpen my charcoal pencil.

"My name is \_not \_Toothless, Stormy."

Ever since he called me a 'little storm' one afternoon when I was frustrated with his tail, he didn't seem to mind his ridiculous nickname as much. Of course, that means he calls me 'Stormy,' and I'm

still trying to figure out whether that's an insult or compliment, or maybe even a little of both.

"Whatever," I roll my eyes, unable to think of a comeback that wouldn't involve him calling me 'Stormy' or me calling him 'Toothless' again.

"What was that, anyways?" he asks when I put the pencil away.

"If you must know, I'm keeping track of your progress. So far, most of it ends with you flying your way headfirst into the lake."

"It's not my fault! I just can't seem to get above these stupid walls," he mutters angrily.

Something pulls inside me. Maybe guilt.

"It's okay, we'll figure it out," I promise, hoping that it's true.

He doesn't respond. Instead, he wanders over to the basket and pulls out a salmon, absentmindedly gulping it down in four swift bites. Dragons sure eat a lot. But why can't they hunt for themselves instead of raiding our village?

As a matter of fact, I asked Hiccup that the other day, and he just pointed the conversation back to something else. It didn't make sense, but then again, what in this world did? Still, I'm curious as to why they would steal from us opposed to hunting for their own food.

"If we add gears, all you'd have to do was shift in between them, and you'd be able to manipulate the tailfin. You just have to get used to using these," I wiggle my fingers as example.

He sighs. "I can't seem to figure it out. Every time I get used to doing it, it becomes foreign and strange again. Dragons don't need fingers, so why should we use them? My mom would have taught me, but..." he fades off, looking thoughtful. His green eyes had dilated into very large, almost squared pupils. If I didn't know any better, I'd say they almost looked...sad.

"Don't worry, we'll get you back to your family- or, whatever a group of Dragons is called. You'll be back in the air in no time, I'm sure of it."

"Thanks, Astrid."

I blink in surprise. He doesn't say my name too often. And when he does, it always sounds strange on his lips, as if he was not made to be pronouncing it. Which, I suppose, he isn't. But when he uses my name, I can't help but feel just the slightest bit flattered.

I rub it off with my usual emotionless demeanor.

"Don't thank me yet. Or ever. It's my fault you're downed in the first place. I owe you one."

"You don't owe me," he says in my ear, and I nearly fall off the rock I'm sitting on because he was literally twenty feet away one second

ago.

"Don't...give...me a heart attack!" I push him away, and I only pause for a moment to marvel at how easy it had been for me to touch him.

"And yes, I do."

"No you don't." he immediately denies.

"Hiccup, it's my fault you're stuck here in the first place."

"Yes, but you spared my life. I'd say that more than makes up for it. Especially since I'm a Dragon and you're a...well, a Viking." I can tell that it stings a little for him to admit that I'm the same as everybody else in my village, but if that were true, would I still be here? The answer is that I honestly don't know.

"But you didn't kill me. So I owe you, okay?" I push, but once again that pesky Night Fury comes up with a reply.

"But you came back. And you helped me. Helping me."

"That didn't make sense."

"Oh, for the love of- just accept that you don't owe me anything!" he throws up his hands and walks away, and I laugh at how funny his frustration looks on him.

"You're not made to be frustrated, are you?"

"I'm meant to be either fierce, threatening, or downright terrifying. Which would you prefer?"

"Hmm, heavy sarcasm seems to be part of your chemical buildup," I note in a mocking and scientific tone.

"Shut up."

"No, I don't think I will."

"A bold thing to say in front of the acclaimed Night Fury," he grins mischievously.

"A \_toothless \_Night Fury-"

Before I can blink an eye, I'm suddenly being tackled into the water.

I come up sputtering the same way Hiccup had just a few minutes ago.

"You are such a jerk!" I screech, and splash water at him.

He gives me a very \_un\_-toothless smile and splashes back. I can't help but laugh.

"Useless half-reptile," I insult.

"Stupid half-human," he fires back.

I don't even stop to think about the overall weirdness of the

situation: Just us, a Viking and a Night Fury, without a weapon in sight and absolutely no intention of either of us harming the other.

\* \* \*

><p>"Alright, I think I have it," I announce the next day. There is no way possible that I can sneak up on Hiccup, so I pretty much skip the greetings and small talk.<p>

As usual, Hiccup is waiting for me happily. "Okay."

"Okay?" I raise my eyebrow and drop the tailfin on the ground. "That's all I get? For staying up all night long and then raising up at the crack of dawn for early morning training-"

"Training?"

Oh, shoot.

"Uh...yeah...for, uh...Viking...stuff..."

"Cool. Did you bring food?" he asks with different enthusiasm.

"What? I mean, yeah. I did." I dropped the basket of fish as well.

"You really like fish," I comment, amused.

"Uh huh. Most Dragons do."

"If they like fish so much then why do they raid our sheep?"

But he's already scarfing down his meal, and he doesn't hear me. Or, maybe he did, but just pretended not to.

After he finished an hour's worth of fishing (in about five minutes flat), he was ready to get started.

"So, what's the plan today?" he jumps up, licking his lips.

"You're going to learn gears," I say.

He pauses and looks nervous. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"Sure. We'll find a way so that I can fly with you up there for a moment so we can see if it actually works or not, but after that, we should be able to get you flying."

"Okay," he says.

"Just the thing, though...how am I going to fly with you?"

"Easy, can't you just fly yourself?"

I freeze at his suggestion. Subconsciously, I sneak a glance down at my arm wrappings.

"I'm sure you can get your wings."

"But...if I get my wings, I'll Turn, and I won't be able to go back..."

He doesn't have anything to say to that, and I didn't expect him to.

"I'm sure I can just carry you. I'm stronger than I look, you know," he says.

I twist my mouth into a thin, hard line and run my hands up either sides of the insides of my wrists. My scales haven't bothered me too much, but once I added the pressure, it was like they wanted to come alive and were buzzing with energy.

Another thing I had recently noticed; I always referred to my scales as 'they', 'them', or 'it'. They were always things, not part of my actual body. I can't let them be. But I hadn't looked at them in a while.

"Okay," I say shakily. "Let's just get this over with."

Hiccup laughs. "If that's your attitude about flying, it's going to be one heck of a flight."

"Excuse me?" I cross my arms and try to ignore the burst of desperate desire in my arms to be freed.

"In flight. If you don't want to be flying, it's not going to be a fun experience."

"Well, I'm not looking for a good experience. I'm only looking for getting you back in the air, so we can both go back to where we belong."

"Oh. Okay."

I felt a little bad as soon as I snapped at him, but that's what our goal was- is- right?

"Okay. So, gears. Let's see..."

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day Four<em>

\_Today, I flew with Hiccup. First, we attached a string to my hand so I could shift between gears. It works best if I turn them manually, but he can't always reach for it.\_

\_It actually worked, for the most part. The part that scared me though was the actual flying. I always came off of his back dazed and a little light headed. I just played it off like I got air-sickness.\_

\_But that wasnt it. It was holding back the buzz in the scales. They wanted the air, they wanted to be flying. It was really hard to ignore. We flew around the cove for a few (really fast) laps before it got too much and I couldn't concentrate.\_

\_Higher, they urged. Just a little higher. I couldn't pay attention to the gears and we ended up getting tossed into the lake, but hey, it worked, did it not?\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day Five<em>

\_Today, we tried my feet. I actually directed us out of the cove. I was determined to keep the Dragon in me contained, and it actually worked.\_

\_That is, until Hiccup caught scent of something and dived downwards, too quick for me to react.\_

\_I was sent rolling into a patch of grass.\_

\_"Hiccup, what the heck was that about?" I had demanded, but he wasn't listening. He was too busy rolling around in the grass, himself. He was utterly happy and looked about as content as he could be. He almost looked...drugged. Like he had eaten some kind of weird herb that made his brain turn to mush.\_

\_To be honest, he looked like a cat, with his ear flaps pressed tightly to his head in contentment, his wings flailing around like he was rolling in catnip for Dragons.\_

\_I will never understand that useless Dragon.\_

\_The grass did kind of smell good, though...\_

\_I tucked some in my pocket. Who knew when it could come in handy in the ring, right? That's the reason and I'm sticking with it.\_

\* \* \*

><p>"So, my leg doesn't work, either," I grumble the next day. "How is this going to work?"<p>

"You tell me."

"Right. So, you carry me on your back like usual, and I cling to dear life praying we don't fall-"

"And you control...this...weird thingy," Hiccup tried to reach the metal contraption that ran from his tail to right underneath his arm. It was a way that if you turned the dial, it would shift gears, making it easier. But it was tricky and complicated, and I'm not sure Hiccup's ready for it. Heck, I'm not even sure if \_I'm \_ready for it.

"Okay. So. You're gonna have to trust me to fly us out of the cove, and then we'll attach this rope here to something so I can practice the different gears," I go over the plan.

"Sounds good," he flaps his wings and shakes out his body. He's anxious, I can feel it in the air. What I won't ever admit is that I am, too.



"Let's do this..."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>So, what'd you think? I know, lots of filler things. I hope the journal entries helped with those small scenes from the actual movie. It passed too quickly, and I know that there should be more Viking moments, so I'll add those next. But next chapter will begin with them practicing, more Viking stuff, and who knows? We might even get to their first actual flight...<strong>

\*\*See you next Thursday!\*\*

## 8. How To Become Airborn

It was a struggling process, but eventually, I get Hiccup and myself out of the cove. We both lay resting on the edge of the cove. Just getting out of there was a struggle. I'm really hoping actually flying won't be as hard.

"You okay?" I ask, getting up.

Hiccup flaps his wings and picks himself up. "Never better," he grins, "but I should be asking you that. You're arm's all good?"

"Huh? Oh. Yeah," I glance down at said arm. Both of my arms are still wrapped tight in their bindings, but my right arm had healed a few days ago. It hadn't been in a splint for a while. Funny how Hiccup is concerned.

"So, where are we headed?" he asks, stretching and giving a yawn.

"I was thinking the cliffs. They always seem to have a nice, sturdy wind and they're pretty secluded."

"Perfect."

"Alright. Let's go, Toothless," I push past him and begin to lead the way. One more step and I could have been blasted by a plasma blast.

I freeze in my tracks and slowly turn around.

"Did you just throw a fire ball at me?" I ask dangerously.

"Pfft. Me? \_What?\_ Ha, no," Hiccup says cheekily. He's not very good at hiding 'smug'.

"Oh, you are so going to get it you useless half-reptile!"

"Catch me if you can you stupid half-human!" he winks and bounds off.

I snort in shock before racing after him. I reach a hand back for my axe, but I realize that it isn't there. Darn, I had forgotten it again. Is it strange that I don't feel in danger?

Yes. Yes it is. Unfortunately, I've come to consensus with these

kinds of things already.

I race after Hiccup, eventually passing him as he doesn't really know where he's going. Every now and then, he'll try to flap his wings. He'll soar a few feet ahead but he can't stay in the air. Hopefully we'll change that.

Now, you're probably wondering why I don't just help Hiccup out and let him stay out of the cove. I offered this to him, but I didn't show my reluctance. He must have sensed it though. I mean, I did have his best interests in mind, honest. If he wanted to get out of the cove I would have helped him. But the reason I didn't say was that I was still worried. Friend or not, he knows my secret. That's a dangerous game, one I'm not willing to play let alone lose.

But, luckily for me, he pressed that the cove was safe and he trusted me.

And if you are wondering; yes. It stung. It stung a lot more than it should have.

Hiccup reaches the cliffs first with me dragging not too far behind. I still want to punch him, but not so much in anger anymore.

"Alright, where to start?" he leaps up onto a stump and balances himself in a position that should have been uncomfortable, yet he somehow seemed perfectly fine. As per usual. Sigh. Dragons.

"First, let's get you hooked up," I say, reaching in my pack to pull out a long rope.

\* \* \*

><p>"No, left! Further left! Further down! Too much!"<p>

"Hiccup, for the love of Thor, \_shut up!\_\_" \_

Hiccup is trying to give me advice, which seemed like he should know more than I would, as he's used to operating a tailfin, but such was not the case. I guess I know more about mechanics than he does, and the tail is, well, a mechanic.

"This isn't working!" he shouts, falling through the air and sending us both tumbling across the ground- only, he is jerked to a stop by the rope attached to his harness. I on the other hand go rolling across the ground like an ale barrel, the kind that Gobber downs every Snoggletog.

"Really?" I retort, my voice dripping with sarcasm. Normally, I'm blunt and straight to the point, not bothering with the elaboration it takes for sarcasm, but what can I say? Hiccup has been influencing me. So it is said that people pick up on each other's habits, and up until now, I hadn't really understood what that meant. Now, I understand it a little \_too \_well.

I groan as I heave myself off the ground.

"I know the positions. I just can't...it's too muscle memory. And while that's okay for fighting, it doesn't work too well for a

prosthetic tailfin." I kick the stump just for good measure.

"Hey, be nice to the stump. It didn't do anything."

In that moment, an extra strong burst of wind comes at Hiccup. The stupid Dragon, he had his wings fanned out, and the wind caught them at just the right time.

Coincidence? I think not.

"Whoa!" he exclaims as he rockets back, once again being jerked to a halt.

I can't help it, I burst out laughing.

He grumbles, growling a little in frustration.

"Oh my gods, Hiccup..." I stifle my laughter just enough so I can ask if he's alright.

"Fine," he mutters. "But now I see your problem with this stump."

His hands start to glow a bright blue, but immediately jump in front of the stump, knowing what's about to happen.

"Wait stop!" I say.

He does.

"What?" he blinks.

"One, you can't just blast everything that irritates you, that's not reasonable, no matter how satisfying it might seem," -rich, coming from me- "and two, we need that stump! What else are we going to tie the harness to?"

He growls again and his ear flaps press flat against his head.

"Fine," he grumbles.

"Good," I say, turning away and digging through my pack. "Let's go again. I want to try for controlled flight."

"Alright," he mumbled, fingering the harness as best he could.

I climb on his back again (which is actually a lot less awkward than it sounds...okay, I lie. Yes, it is as awkward as it sounds) after I check the gears. I scribble something down on the cheat sheet I had started a few test flights ago and pat his arm.

"Alright, let's see..."

Hiccup spreads his wings and the wind easily picks us up.

So I did say that flying with Hiccup was really awkward, but once we were in the air, all of those thoughts vanish. There is nothing like flying. Just the wind that tears up my eyes, the adrenaline that makes my heart go racing, the dauntless feeling of leaving the

ground. And we aren't even really in the air.

I reach back and flick the gears. It makes us both go face planting.

"Ow," Hiccup complains. He sits up with his wings open and resting on the ground, with his legs splayed in an uncomfortable 'w' shape. I, myself, land on my stomach with a glorious face full of dirt.

"O-kay," I say, once again heaving myself up. Now I really want Hiccup to explode that stump. "In the air, I'm guessing that's for dives?"

"Uh huh," Hiccup replies, flapping his wings and looking extra Dragon-like.

I jot that down on my cheat sheet.

"So, I have the pretty basic positions now. Do you want me to show you?"

He nods.

I click the gears down all the way. "That's what I just did. That will pretty much just let you fall in the air."

I re-click it up all the way. "This is for sharp ascents, all you have to do is flap with this one." At his confused look, I add, "This was the one where we almost snapped the rope because you went too high."

"Right," he immediately nods.

I show him the other positions for sharp turns, left, right, gliding, and so forth.

"So, that's all I have. Here, you try."

He leans down to study the tailfin for a moment. After a few minutes of getting familiar with the fin, I think he's ready.

"So, you have to rely on the rope for steadiness right now," I say. "Remember, for easy take offs, position-"

"Three."

"Four."

"Right."

He slowly unfurls his wings, and, using his Dragon speed, reaches back and flicks the gears up. He's a little shaky, but he gets up.

"Yeah!" I cheer. "Go Toothless!"

"Shut up, Stormy," he growls, but he looks pleased. A little strained, but pleased.

He can get gliding once he gets up there, but it's the ascent and descent that he seems to have trouble with. Which worries me, as he's a Dragon made for speed and agility.

"I'm just used to faster takeoffs," he insists, but I'm not too sure that's it.

"We'll do more tomorrow. Let your body get used to the new usages."

"Come on, I can do it! Let's go for a real test flight!" he suggests.

As much as I want to say no, a part of me really wants to get in the air, just to taste the winds, even if they aren't on my own wings—er, by myself. I won't be having \_any \_wings. Not now, not ever.

I promised myself that much.

"I don't know, Hiccup..."

"Come on, please? I'm ready, I know I am. I can do it! I know you can, too. I trust you," he pushes.

He trusts me. Oh gods, what do I do? Do I trust him? I mean, I feel safe enough to not need an ax around him now, but... Does that mean I trust him? What even is trust? Does Astrid Hofferson even know what trust is?

To be honest, I don't think I do. I don't think I'll ever. But if I did trust anyone, I'd trust Hiccup. Is that strange? Ironical at the very least, I suppose.

"Hiccup, I'm not sure you're ready. What if—"

"I won't let you fall, Stormy," he smiles.

I sigh, and we both know that I have decided.

"Five minutes."

"Yes!"

I really hope no Viking saw the brief display of blue plasma blasts shooting up from the cliffs. But even if they did, they wouldn't understand that it was a celebration.

\* \* \*

><p>"Okay, Toothless, we're just gonna take this nice and slow," I say, patting his shoulder reassuringly. I don't know whether it's for me or him. Maybe both.<p>

"Fine by me," Hiccup grits his teeth, keeping his wings steady. Even though I'm the one shifting the positions, he's still getting used to being in the air again after those couple weeks. I figure it must be like not walking for a while. Like when Elder Gothi holds a fevered Viking through the winter and they walk again in the rare sunlight after a whole ten months of rest. You know, if they actually make it

through the winter. Some don't.

I check the tailfin, making sure it's nice and tight. The cheat sheet is secured with a clip-of-sorts on Hiccup's harness.

"So far so good," I mumble to myself. Then, a little louder, "You ready?"

"I was born to do this!" Hiccup replies dryly.

"Oh shut up."

His reply is cut short when I click the fin down, and we are sent plunging slowly but faster than I might desire to the ocean below.

I make sure everything is fine before I let myself enjoy it. We're not out of the woods yet. Hiccup keeps looking around, like he's making sure he's alright, too. That really doesn't comfort me, but, he's the expert, I guess, right?

I eventually pull us up and we go gliding right below a flock of sea gulls.

"Yes, it worked," I announce triumphantly. I'm feeling very proud of myself-

"Astrid!"

"Whoa!"

We crash into a rock pillar, pretty heavily. Luckily, Hiccup's suffered worse and the blow hardly phases him. He's not too happy about it, though.

"Sorry!" I shout.

Right on time, Hiccup crashes into a second rock pillar.

"My bad," I cringe.

"You could say that again." Hiccup tosses his head and I am promptly slapped in the face with one of his ear flaps. It doesn't really hurt but it's enough to make a point.

I roll my eyes.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm on it. Position four."

"Three."

"Right."

I click the fin in place, and Hiccup immediately begins to sail upwards, flapping his wings as fast as he can go. We both cry out with shouts of delights.

"Oh, I missed this!" Hiccup exclaims, closing his eyes in happiness. My stomach is leaping into my throat, but in a good kind of way...if that's even possible. Which it is, I assure you, I'm experiencing it now.

He laughs, and I can't help but grin to myself as well. He lets out a loud roar and I can't bring myself to worry about whether or not anyone will hear.

"The wind in my-"

"Cheat sheet!" I cry. Due to the wind, the cheat sheet had loosened, and the clip had released its tight hold. "Stop!" I command.

Hiccup doesn't quite understand, but he obeys, quite quickly- a little too quickly.

"No!" I shout, reaching for the small sheet. In my grasp, I don't think about the air, I don't think about the height, I don't think about the Dragon who can't fly without me. I don't even think about holding on.

"\_ASTRID!\_"

I hear my name called, but I don't process much after that. All I can think is 'I'm falling, I'm falling.'

Then, the panic sets in, and I start screaming.

"Oh, great Odin's ghost, this is it!" I shout between screams.

"Astrid! You gotta, kind of...angle yourself!" Hiccup tries to call.

I scream again, desperately clawing for something- \_anything, \_but, as I'm literally in the air, there is nothing to grab.

Something whacks into my arm, and the bone that was healed but fragile gives out a scream of its own.

"Oh, great Alphas, I'm so sorry!" I hear Hiccup cry.

I don't know how long we fall. All I know is that I fall faster than hiccup does, as I slid and he floated for a moment.

"\_Hiccup!\_" I shriek.

I hear a large \_swooshing \_sound and suddenly, I'm being caught- bridal style. It would have been much more humiliating had I not been about to fall to my death.

I don't know how Hiccup managed to fall below me enough to catch me through the air, but he does. He moves me to his back where I cling around his neck.

"Astrid, are you alright?" he asks.

"We're kind of falling here!" I retort.

"I know, but, I mean...your hand."

"I'm fine!" I press.

"But you can't operate the tailfin."

I stay silent. Maybe because I don't have the answer we both want, or maybe just because I can glimpse the ground now- and it's coming fast. I'll just blame it on the ground.

"Hiccup!" I shout again.

His green eyes widen and he snaps his wings out. The force must feel like they're about to be ripped off, but he only narrows his eyes in concentration.

I'm not quite sure what would have happened had we not flown straight into a misty collection of rock pillars. They were jagged, we were going too fast, I couldn't shift gears, and Hiccup could barely control them himself. It wasn't such a good match.

But that's exactly what happens.

I scream again, but Hiccup tips downwards.

"Hold on," he warns, right before he tucks his wings in and plunges into the maze.

I can't really put into words what happens next. So, for now, I'll just say, Hiccup \_flew \_through those rocks. And it was pretty damn amazing.

"You did it!" I exclaimed, still a little shaken by the fact that I had almost hurtled to my death.

Hiccup smiles a little, but it mainly looks like a grimace.

Something's wrong, I think.

"Are you okay? Are you hurt?" I ask. I feel terrible. In all of my panic, I didn't even think about whether or not \_Hiccup \_was okay. My arm was throbbing but I could move my fingers, if only a little. But who knows what could have happened to Hiccup.

"Fine," he gruffly replies. He refuses to look back at me, which makes me all the more concerned. Something's really wrong, and we need to land, now. The victory over Hiccup being able to fly will have to wait.

"You're not fine. Land down there. Now." I point to a clearing on a rocky shore, a nice open place. It's on an island that the Berkians won't be able to see.

Once we land, I climb down and brush my skirt off subconsciously.

I fold my arms over my chest and lean to one side.

"Spill," I demand.

"I'm fine," he says, but he still won't look at me.

"Well something's up," I say.



"It's...nothing..."

"Dragons aren't very good at lying," I note. Hiccup sighs and sits down, looking down at his clawed fingers.

"So..." I sit down next to him.

"It's just...I'm so sorry, Astrid," he blurts out and looks away.

Oh...

\_Oh\_.

Now I feel like a stupid half-reptile. Don't...ever tell anyone I said that.

"Hiccup, that wasn't your fault," I say, but he doesn't look convinced. Should have known it would have taken more than that.

I sigh myself.

I don't know what to do in these situations. All I know how to do is aim, throw, and whack things with my axe. Fighting is the Viking way. More so applied to me, we aren't very touchy-feely. Feelings aren't something we do. We knock over a cart of weapons? We apologize. We hit someone in the face, we apologize. But if we almost get someone killed, so what. It's something we risk every day.

Of course, I've never even had anyone to be remotely soft for. It's always been Gronkle-tough Astrid, or fearless Astrid. Never weak enough for feelings.

So I do the only thing I know how to do; I punch him in the face.

Hard.

"W-what was that for?" Hiccup cries, after sitting back up from being knocked flat on his back.

"\_That's\_ for letting me fall," I state. Hiccup takes this as 'I'm angry with you. How dare you' and looks away in shame.

A small smile tugs at the corner of my mouth.

Now for the part I don't know anything about.

I grasp Hiccup's arm and pull him into a hug. It's short and brief and doesn't feel very warm at all, but it's a sort of affection that I am unfamiliar with. I think Hiccup senses this, as he stiffens at first and doesn't have time to do anything else as I pull away after two seconds.

We sit in silence for a moment or two. I watch him, waiting for some sign showing that he gets that I've already forgiven him, that I never blamed him in the first place.

Eventually, he glances up, giving me a questioning look.

I don't look at him when I say, "That's for everything else."

It finally clicks with him, he realizes that I'm thanking him for catching me. He looks away again, but he's not frowning anymore.

"Sorry that, you know, I let you fall," he apologizes sincerely.

"It's okay. Sorry for...you know...causing that in the first place."

He grins. "Thanks for flying with me."

"Thanks for catching me."

We don't say anything else, but that's okay, because we don't need to.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry! Last Thursday, the excuse is actually not that I posted that new PJO story, I just didn't have a chapter ready, I had homework, the computer was being hogged, and I haven't had any time to make up for it. I still have a lot of homework, and am in fact putting some off to write this chapter...but enough about my personal struggles. I hope this was a really melodramatic and amazing substitute for last week's failed update!<strong>

\*\*I would like to thank and welcome all of the new followers, and I will be catching up on replying to reviews right after I post this. Please let me know what you think, how I'm doing, questions, what I should do (no guarantees I'll listen though...), some random stuff, whatever. See you all next time! \*\*

## 9. How To Be Surprised

Hiccup isn't at all what I thought Dragons were. I've been trained to fight them, to kill them, to hate them with my every being. How can this be real at all? It just doesn't make sense. I voice these opinions to the Night Fury himself, and he thinks about it.

"I don't know. I've never really been taught to hate Vikings, just to pity them," he responds.

"Pity?" I question, a little offended. Why would Dragons pity us?

"Because," Hiccup takes a pause to tear into another fish. "For one, you all are weaker, you're fueled by hate, you can't fly, you depend on each other for protection-"

"We can protect ourselves just fine!" I defend. So we are weaker than Dragons, that's a known fact and though it injures my pride, it's true. We are fueled by hate, but that's because so many have died from the Dragons, and even more have Bonded, turning into beasts who turn on their own village-mates.

"Never said you couldn't, but you do have to work together towards a goal."

"Is that so bad?" Generally, I'm more of a solo Viking, but I do work well with others- only if I'm on command, of course.

"No-" another bite/gulp "-but you don't like to handle things on your own, from what I've seen. You, of course, are the exception, but what's new."

"I am not afraid to punch you in the face and make you \_really \_toothless," I growl. I think I've had enough of a Dragon's point of view.

"Hey, don't shoot the Terror- ah, speaking of which..."

If it's possible, Hiccup lowers to the ground, his eyes dilating into slits and narrowing, his lip curling back just the slightest bit.

"What, you afraid of Terrors?" I joke, squinting to see a flock of small winged creatures beating their wings like mad, heading straight for us.

"Terrors are fine, it's the babies that aren't," he growls, protectively wrapping a wing around his pile of fish.

"What's so wrong with babies?" I ask.

"They don't listen to \_anyone.\_"

I laugh.

Sure enough, the Terrors that flop to the ground look no older than six or seven at the oldest. The youngest being maybe four.

There are three in this flock. One has green wings with red horns protruding from its- ahem, his, scraggly head of black hair, this one seems to be about five in Viking years, I would guess. I don't really know how Dragons age, or if it's any different. The second I see is a girl, six or seven I would guess. She has blonde hair a bit like mine with red wings and horns. Her hair's a mess, though, stringy, unkept, and windswept, much like Hiccup's. The third is the youngest looking, the possible four-year-old. He is also green with red horns, though with more of a blueish tint. He looks like he could be a sibling (hatchling?) to the older female with stringy blonde hair. They all have yellow eyes.

I wonder why Hiccup's eyes are green. Most Dragons have yellow eyes. I mean, my Uncle Finn got glowing eyes, but that was because he Bonded with a Flightmare. Hiccup's nothing like anything I've ever known before. He's deadly yet sane, calm yet tempting, dangerous yet protective. I'm not sure whether I should laugh or run for my life. I guess I've already chosen, though.

The oldest male squawks and pulls a fish from under Hiccup's wing. He growls at it but gulps another one down himself.

The older girl tries to steal it but he waves her hands and a jet of flames go roaring out, aimed right at the girl. The Terror backs off

respectively.

Hiccup then notices a small fish slowly sliding away. He narrows his eyes but keeps watching it.

Soon enough, the young boy drags a fish about the size of his head away, eying Hiccup. Quick as a flash, Hiccup snatches the fish and in a five-second game of tug of war, Hiccup tosses the fish and in the air and it lands back on his pile.

"Ha!" he snorts. "Take that!"

The little boy squawks, but he doesn't say anything. I almost expect him to.

He only growls and leans down on all fours. He then squats and starts to aim at Hiccup, but with the flick of one finger, Hiccup sets the lighted gas on fire and the Terror is sent spiraling away in a miniature explosion.

"Hiccup," I scold.

"What?" he asks innocently.

I sigh and roll my eyes, watching as the little boy gets up, heavily dazed. I could swear that his pupils were rolling.

A small tug on my skirt makes me jump a mile.

The female Terror, the one with the blueish green wings, is crouched right next to me. I hadn't even noticed her come up.

"Stealthy little one, aren't you?" I say when I regain my composure.

She gives a small cackle, looking only slightly pathetic.

"Don't do it," Hiccup warns.

"I wasn't going to!" I snap, not needing advice from a Dragon.

She tips forward just slightly, making her eyes look bigger.

"No," I say firmly. "Shoo."

She doesn't budge. Instead, she creeps closer.

I make a distressed sound in the back of my throat. "Oh, fine!" I grumble, tossing her a fish and ignoring the glare Hiccup sends me. "Don't eat it all at once."

She lunges for it and begins to tear into it. In a few seconds, there is nothing but torn meat left. Perfectly good meat, I might add, but she licks her lips and look content.

To my surprise, she then grabs the fish with her teeth and drags it over to the other blonde-haired Terror, the one who had been blown back.

The Terror snaps his head and he leans his head to rub against the

older Terror's shoulder before leaning down to gobble down the torn meat that is ripped just enough for him to eat it.

"Huh...you guys...take care of each other," I think aloud.

"Of course," Hiccup states. "I'd bet that's her hatchmate, and their parents have already had another batch of eggs."

I furrow my brow, thinking about it. I suppose it'd be nice to have someone to always look out for me. Comforting, like I know they'd have my back.

After a while, the three Terrors leave, and Hiccup stomps out the fire.

"You ready?" he asks.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, let's go. Do you want to try flying on your own?"

He shrugs. "Sure."

"Alright. Come on, up you go."

It would be nice to say that Hiccup took off like a professional and swooped and dived to his heart's content, but, unfortunately, that's not what happens. I cringe as he gets ten feet in the air, then promptly crashes back down, not lightly, I might add.

"What was that?" I demand.

"I-I don't know," he admits. "The gears just feel...wrong. Like I can't get them anymore."

"But you had it!" I exclaim.

"I know!" he says, frustrated. He gets up and walks away. I don't know if he notices, but a few blue sparks shoot out of his fingertips and ignite a small shrub. I notice.

"It's- it's okay. We'll figure it out, alright? Everything will work out. You'll be able to fly again."

"Yeah, sure," he responds. He runs a hand through his dark brown hair, pushing it out of his eyes. I sigh.

"Come on, we'll work more tomorrow."

Without another word, he gets up. I climb onto his back (it's only awkward if you make it awkward, right?) and shuffle with the gears a bit before I nod my head. Hiccup launches us into the air and I catch us with the prosthetic.

We fly home for a few minutes in silence, and not the comforting kind. The kind where nobody knows what to say and the suspense kills each of them. Well, I'm not really sure what Hiccup thought about it all but I sure feel weird.

Just as I open my mouth, I tense.

"Astrid?" Hiccup asks, feeling the difference.

"Shut up," I warn him, trying to listen.

"What is it?"

"I said shut \_up\_!" I hiss, cocking my head.

Something in me stirs. Something strong.

\_Come this way, \_it calls. For some reason, I feel compelled to obey it. More than compelled, I \_want\_ to obey that voice.

I click the gears and Hiccup shouts out as we bank right.

"Astrid, what are you doing?" Hiccup tries to flap against me but the tail's controlling where he's going and if he doesn't flap we'll fall.

"Quiet," I say, listening.

\_This way...\_

I feel in a daze as I direct Hiccup through the air, flapping past boulders and soaring through rock obelisks. I follow the voice calling me. It's so strong.

\_Closer, closer. You're almost there.\_

"Astrid, wait, stop!" Hiccup shouts, folding in his wings.

"Hiccup, \_fly!\_" I shout back, and, startled, he obeys.

"Astrid, please, turn us around, the Dragon in you is being controlled-"

"There is no Dragon in me!" I shout.

"Yes there is! If there wasn't, you wouldn't be able to hear \_her.\_"

"Who? Never mind, it doesn't matter. We have to go in there."

"In where?"

Actually, I don't really know where 'there' is, but once we clear the fog to reveal a mountain, I am suddenly certain.

"In there," I say firmly.

Hiccup's eyes widen.

"Astrid, no, don't-"

"Shut up," I say, making him move.

He sighs and looks worried, but I don't think about it.

There's a small entrance where other Dragons are entering as well, and I fly us in as well.

Inside, it's dark with a red hue and very, very hot. Too many Dragons in one small space.

We land on a ledge and I look around.

"Whoa," I say in amazement, turning around.

\_Show me your arms, Dragon.\_

I don't question the voice. I have found out that it's female, and she sounds superior, like she knows what she's talking about. I should listen to her... So I do.

My arm wrappings fall to the ground and my scales scream with relief at being released from their cloth bindings.

I breathe out and sigh, content feeling.

"Astrid, please, let's go," Hiccup says, but I brush him off.

"In a minute," I breathe, still looking around.

All the Dragons around me stare at me, but not threateningly. Only like I'm someone new. I don't even skip a beat.

"Astrid, please-"

"Oh, no, Astrid, it is, please, stay," a new voice surrounds the cavern, echoing off the walls. It's the voice, in real form.

Hiccup glowers. I don't see the fear he masks behind his slitted eyes. Why would I? What does he have to fear?

A Dragon swoops down in front of me. She's the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Her hair is brown and falls to her waist, wild and windswept. Her features are pointed, giving her an elegant grace. Her wings are attached to her arms, but they're ginormous, even bigger than Hiccup's, no, much larger than Hiccup's. They are an off-white shade tinged with red. She has flaps much like Hiccup's sprouting from her head, only the color of her wings and not black. Her tail curves behind her, long and reminding me of Hiccup's, only different.

As she walks, she spreads her wings. They emerge from her back and stretch out.

Wait...

I realize that this Dragon has four wings.

Her yellow eyes are completely slitted, ten times thinner than the thinnest I've ever seen Hiccup's.

She smiles, and her deadly fangs flash in the dim red light. It should send shivers down my back. It doesn't.

"Welcome, my new hatchling," she says, spreading her arms/wings out.

Hiccup growls and the Dragon's eyes swivel to meet Hiccup's. I turn.

Hiccup is casually leaned against the rock with his wings folded upwards, his arms crossed and his ear flaps pressed flat against his heads. If it weren't for the ear flaps, he'd have looked completely relaxed and at ease. But why is he tense? What does he have to fear?

"Hiccup," her wide, cold smile grows wider, and colder.

Hiccup growls. "Leave the girl alone."

"Oh, but my Dragon, she's Bonding. She belongs to me now."

"She belongs to no one," he leans forward to spit it out.

Why is Hiccup being so hostile? I want to protect the Dragon lady.

"Hiccup, enough," I snap.

Hiccup gapes at me, but he doesn't look angry, he only looks concerned.

I fold my arms and glare at him.

"Yes, Hiccup, enough. But welcome home."

"This isn't my home."

"Oh, but it should be. It will be." That sounds an awful lot like a threat, but why would she threaten him? Well, she wouldn't. Obviously. She's not here to threaten me. And if she did, it would be for the best, I'm sure.

"\_This\_ will \_never\_ be my home, \_you\_ will never be my \_queen,\_ and I am only \_here\_ because of \_her\_. Let her go. She's not ready."

"On the contrary, she is perfect," the Dragon lady gasps. "You must come home, my Night Fury. You belong here. With us."

"I belong nowhere. Least of all here, \_mother,\_" Hiccup spits.

For a moment, my mind clears when I hear this. This is Hiccup's \_mother\_?

\_What\_ have I gotten us in to? \_I\_ wonder before the Dragon lady turns back to me and I loose myself in her yellow, slitted eyes and her wide, cold smile.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Oh my gosh! What just happened? Well, you'll have to keep reading to find out! If, you know, I ever update for you guys to find out... really sorry, I didn't have a chapter ready and someone else needed the computer more than I did. This chapter isn't too long because I have to get ready for a concert I learned of as of yesterday but hopefully what happens makes up for it?<br>\*\*

\*\*Also sorry, but Thursdays aren't going to work for update days anymore. Would you all be okay if I moved it to Wednesday?\*



**\*\*And yes, this chapter is confusing, but please don't hate me because I made Hiccup's mom evil! All will be explained, I promise!\*\***

**\*\*Until next time (hopefully next Wednesday?), my readers!\*\***

## 10. How To (Not) Notice An Invisible Dragon

\_What in Valhalla's name is going on?\_

That's what I'm thinking the entire time. I don't know what's going on. But I know that I want to be here. Something about the Dragon lady makes me feel safe. Safe as in, protected. I want to be here. I am safe here.

Hiccup is safe here.

So why is he being so tense?

"Hiccup, relax," I tell him.

"I am not going to relax. We need to leave now and \_she's \_clouding your judgement."

"Why would she do that?" I ask. I notice that I don't ask 'how,' but I don't care. She wouldn't hurt me.

Hiccup's eyes narrow, and not in the squinting way. "She's a Queen now. It's part of her essence."

"Wait... You mean to tell me your mom's a Dragon Queen?" I ask in the wrong tone, but I don't necessarily know that it's the wrong tone.

Hiccup just stares at me. Then, in one flash of black, he grabs me by my shoulders and stares deep into my eyes. For the first time, I meet his Dragon gaze full on and don't feel afraid.

"Astrid," he starts, "we need to leave. If we don't, bad things are going to happen-"

"The only bad thing that would happen if we left is that we would leave. Why would I want to leave?"

"She's right, Hiccup," the Dragon lady cut in. "Why would she want to leave when she's got everything she needs right here? Why would she want to leave and go back to hiding her true self among Vikings when she could be a \_Dragon\_?"

A tiny part of me flares up at that statement. But as soon as it ignites, it diminishes, leaving me to wonder if it even happened at all.

"Right," I nod shakily.

"\_Astrid,\_ " Hiccup pleads. "Please. You're a \_Viking, \_you \_hate \_Dragons! As much as that pains me to say it, you do! This is not you! Snap out of it!"

"Hiccup," I say slowly. For a moment, he looks hopeful. "You don't know me. Leave me alone. If you want to leave so badly, then go."

I don't remember that he can't, even if he wants to.

He backs down and his ear flaps hang down in defeat.

"So, Astrid, please come with me," the Dragon Queen says.

I nod and blindly follow, my attention completely on her.

"As you know, our Ancestors died out long ago," she begins, her tail dragging behind her. "But one cannot kill of such a noble breed. Dragons returned, and not in the way those pesky Vikings might expect."

"Of course," I agree. Everyone knows this, though. Even the Vikings.

"You probably believe that this is common knowledge," she says, flashing a smile.

I nod again.

"What you don't know," she almost whispers, and I have to strain to hear her. "Is that they have a secret."

She smiles, a deadly flash of her pointed teeth, and takes off to the top of the mountain. Her large wing beats send wave after wave of wind that fans my face.

I look over to Hiccup. "You have to take me up there."

"Do I have a choice?" he sighs, and I jump on his back. In an instant, we're flying up behind the Dragon Queen.

As we land, I sort of let go of the gears a little too early and we both go tumbling down on the rock. I cut myself a little on my shoulder but I ignore it.

"Not quite what I was hoping for, but, well, I suppose he needed to get up here somehow," the Dragon Lady frowns, and I can't help but feel a little guilty. I want to please her, even if I'm not too sure how.

"You were telling a story?" I ask.

"Oh yes!" her eyes brighten up, but the action looks more threatening, especially because her pupils were mere slits, more of a line cutting her eyes in half than a pupil in general. "The secret."

I glance down at my arms. It looks like they're spreading... But...why would that be a bad thing, again? Why am I panicking, this is good, right?

"Dragons came back. Their spirits Bonded with those of Viking lineage."

I know this. We all know this. It's why the Vikings fear Dragons. Why

do they fear Dragons, again?

\_We, not they. I'm a Viking. But...why?\_

My scales are beginning to burn. But not in a painful way. More in an aching, needing way. I close my eyes and shudder.

"Those Bondings are why Dragons still exist, today. The Vikings fear it. They lose themselves to the Dragons. Or so they think. It is only because the Dragon inside is so powerful that they can no longer control it. It contaminates them, taints their minds. But that's what makes them Dragons. They are such beautiful beasts. So powerful, yet so scared. Imagine, a human with the ability to harness the winds," she spreads her wings and a draft lifts her a few feet in the air, "and to summon fire with the single thought of the mind." she opens her palms towards the ceiling, and a miniature bonfire springs to life. The fire reflects in her yellow eyes.

"There is a Dragon inside you, Astrid," she says. Her name sounds foreign on her tongue, but it shouldn't. "There is a Dragon inside us all. What they don't know is that \_all \_the Dragons came back. It is the Viking's curse, why they will never be able to rid themselves of the Dragons."

"\_Enough, \_mother," Hiccup steps in. His features are glaring but his eyes are wild and frightened.

"Hush, Hiccup. She needs to hear this."

My head is spinning, but not from what she told me. There's something...inside me, something that is screaming and thrashing to get out. It will do anything, anything at all. It's talking to me, whispering of the amazing things we'll be able to do together, if only I let it go.

\_Let me out. I will give you power, power you can only begin to imagine. You will be able to fly. You will be able to control fire, you will be able to destroy. Nothing will stand in your way.\_

"Yes, Astrid," the Dragon lady smiles, approvingly. The aching need turns to pain, and I scream.

"Astrid!" Hiccup calls, alarmed.

Is this what Bonding truly is? Is this what it is to lose yourself? Because, if it s, I will give it all away willingly. The pain is too much now. It's not just the pain. If it was, I am a Viking and I can deal with pain. But the aching, the bone-crushing, mind-bending \_need \_is too irresistible. I can't stand it.

"Oh, gods, \_make it stop!\_" I shriek. I cower down and cover my ears, but it does nothing to block the whispering pleas of release.

I break out into a sweat.

"Do not fear it, my little Dragon. Let it come."

With that, a wave of relief washes over me. This is what's supposed to happen. It's not unusual. I'm not in danger because she will protect me.

"Astrid!" Hiccup calls, but it sounds muffled. I look up at him.

He opens his mouth, like he wants to call to me to stop. Like he wants to make it stop. He wants to do something, to help me. But I don't need his help.

Wow, is the world spinning or is it just me?

"Remember who you are!"

I don't know if it's Hiccup or my inner conscious, maybe both. Maybe Hiccup \_is\_ my inner conscious. Either way, I'm too far gone. I hear a large \_ripping\_ \_sound\_ and a light so bright occurs that I have to close my eyes.

All of a sudden, the voices stop. The pain stops, the aching stops, the wind stops, the spinning stops, everything just \_stops\_. \_It's eerily quiet, and I'm almost afraid.

\_But Astrid Hofferson does not feel afraid, \_something reminds me. Who is Astrid Hofferson?

\* \* \*

><p><em>Something is different. Not wrong. Almost...right.<em>

\_I shiver. Definitely right. But what has changed?\_

\_I open my eyes. I'm in a cave. Why am I in a cave? No, not a cave...a volcano. Is it dangerous?\_

\_I taste the air, and find that it reeks of 'danger'.\_

\_Something itches in my arms, and I feel like I want to leave. Now.\_

\_A hand comes to rest gently on my shoulder. Sharp claws dig into my skin, but they don't penetrate. I feel like they should.\_

\_ 'Beautiful,' the soft voice of a female croons, loud and clear through the shifting world. Everything but her voice is muted, muffled, even the sight of everything.\_

\_I look up into the eyes of a Dragon.\_

\_Dragon? Dragons are bad!\_

\_Wait, no they aren't...\_

\_Are they, or aren't they?\_

\_One side of my mind wants to push her away and get out of here, and the other wants to stay.\_

\_The Dragon frowns. 'Interesting...' she murmurs.\_

\_I suck in a breath and release it. My head hurts.\_

\_ 'Stand, my little one,' she commands. I do.\_

\_ 'Come with me.' \_

\_ "...Astrid?" a small voice asks. It is a word. Something that is not familiar to me. In a tongue I do not understand.

><em>

\_ I zip my head around to meet the eyes of yet another Dragon. Why is he speaking a different language?

><em>

\_ Night Fury, my mind supplies. I can't tell whether it's a good or bad or even a thing at all.\_

\_ The Night Fury looks...frightened. But why? \_

\_ Why should I care, is my next question. I shouldn't and I don't, I decide, so I growl at him and turn back to the other Dragon.\_

\_ 'Come,' she beckons and I walk. Everything feels heavy, but not off. Actually, everything feels quite right.\_

\_ I feel like I want to blow something up.\_

\_ Is that normal? \_

\_ 'Come,' she repeats, and I take a few more shuffled steps towards her.\_

\_ I stand next to her. She has led me to the very edge of the rock that we are standing on. I peer down. It's a long way to fall. The height doesn't scare me.\_

\_ 'Look at me, please.' \_

\_ I do. I can't seem to register anything. It's all one big mess that I take in as one, sorting it out while scattering it at the same time.\_

\_ She smiles, pleased at what she sees. 'Good.' \_

\_ Then, she pushes me.\_

\_ I scream, but it comes out as a cackled cry, one of a different language. But no, that's my language.\_

\_ I am falling, falling, falling.\_

\_ This feeling isn't unfamiliar. I have...fallen before? But, how does that make sense? I should be doing something, but my mind can't wrap around what. Nothing is wrong, but I don't know what's right. Something is, and something isn't. If only I could figure out what each was, and what those something's were in the first place.\_

\_ I am falling, falling, falling.\_

\_ What is going on? I am frightened. My mind feels young, undeveloped. I am a Viking, I think suddenly. My entire being curls itself and

hisses at the term. So, no, not a Viking. That couldn't be right. But...what am I? And what is going on?\_

\_I am falling, falling, falling.\_

\_Instinct takes over me as I get closer and closer to the bottom. My senses sharpen, and I position myself so I am no longer tumbling through the air. I spread my arms and they snap out, slowing and eventually stopping my fall. And suddenly...><em>

\_I am flying, flying, flying.\_

\_I let out a laugh and swoop back upwards towards the Dragon Queen.\_

\_Ah, yes, that's what she is. The Dragon Queen. No, \_my \_Dragon Queen. Because that's what I am. A Dragon.\_

\_That is what's right.><em>

\_The look that the Night Fury had given me, that is what's wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong.\_

\_ 'Very good,' my Queen tells me approvingly. I bristle at the thought.\_

\_I want to say something back. I realize that I don't know how.\_

\_"Astrid," the Night Fury says again.\_

\_ 'What is Astrid?' I snarl in frustration. The word sounds foreign on my tongue and tastes vile in my mouth.\_

\_The Night Fury looks even more shocked. I am, too. That's what I meant to say. But that's not \_how \_I meant to say it. But...what other way is there?\_

\_The Night Fury looks away again. I turn back to my Queen.\_

\_ 'Beautiful,' she says, a deep-throated purr.\_

\_"Astrid," the Night Fury speaks. I look at him and he looks determined. "Remember who you are."\_

\_I do not know what he has just said, but I do remember those words. They have meaning...an important meaning. One I cannot remember.\_

Remember who you are...

\_Suddenly, the Night Fury throws himself at my Queen and fires plasma blasts at her. He is harming her!\_

\_I quickly throw myself in between the two, lowering myself to the ground and growling with my hands outstretched, daring him to come any closer. My fire is hot, hotter than his. I don't know how I know

this, and I don't know how he knows this, but we both do and he backs off.

><em>

\_But the fire is still burning in his green eyes.\_

\_He leaps at me and I think of fire. I aim it at him.\_

\_At the very last second, he dodges it and my fire hits the wall behind him, crumbling it to dust and rubble. I stare at the spot. Something shiny is revealed beneath the rock I had just blown away.\_

\_'Come, we have things to do. You may play later.' my Queen says, taking off.\_

\_"Come on, Stormy. This isn't you. You're strong. Fight it. Fight." the Night Fury says, pleads. "Look for yourself."

><em>

\_I don't know why I do. I shouldn't trust this Night Fury speaking in a foreign tongue. I shouldn't be able to understand what he's saying without understanding what he's speaking. Nonetheless, I stumble over to the wall.

><em>

\_The reflection is fuzzy, but my sharpened sight can make it out. Sharpened? Yes, sharpened. My vision didn't used to be this good. But, what was it before? What even is before?\_

\_Everything has changed. I'm not me, but then I am me.\_

\_My wings jut out from my arms, my tail is spiked and curled around my feet, and long horns protrude from my blonde hair.\_

\_My eyes are the thing I really notice.\_

\_The eyes that stare back at me have the slitted pupil that cuts my eyes in half, not so severe as the Queen's, but still slitted.\_

The\_ Queen, not \_my\_ Queen.\_

\_The eyes that stare back at me are not yellow. I have been wrong this the whole time about Dragon eyes. Not yellow, never yellow. They have always been gold.\_

\_But they aren't my eyes.\_

\_Just like these aren't my wings, aren't my horns, aren't my claws, aren't my scales. This isn't my tail, this isn't my body. And these aren't my eyes.

><em>

\_My eyes are blue. Like the scales on my wings. The only Dragon I know that is blue is a...\_

\_Oh my gods. Oh my gods, oh my gods, oh my gods.\_

\_Yes, they are my gods. They are my gods because I am not a Dragon, I am a Viking.

><em>

\_I remember it all now.  
><em>

\_I scream.\_

\_I scream because I am too late, I scream because these aren't my eyes, I scream because I am not me, I scream because I am scared- no, terrified, but most of all, I scream because I have Bonded with a Deadly Nadder.\_

\_I scream, and it sounds human.\_

\* \* \*

><p>"Astrid!" Hiccup shouts. Astrid. I understand. That's my name. That's what the word means.<p>

Somehow, I ended up on the ground. I want to pull myself in and curl up in a ball. This isn't me, though. I am strong, no matter what happens. Go down fighting, I once promised. I don't like to break promises.

"H-Hiccup," I say. It's warm in the volcano, as expected, but I can't be colder.

"What is this?" the Dragon Queen dives back to the ledge. She looks angry. Not a good sign.

"Mom, leave her alone," Hiccup steps in front of me while I stumble to my feet. I have a headache and the world won't stop spinning. Again.

"Hiccup. Move."

She's alarmingly calm, and I know that we should be afraid.

She takes one look at me. I can't see myself, but I know that something is wrong by the way she recoils in disgust.

"How dare you!" she turns to Hiccup.

"Uh, Hiccup?" I say.

"Kind of not the time, but what?"

"We need to go."

"You don't say-"

He's cut off by the shriek of the Dragon Queen. It's a Dragon shriek, one that sends my hands to my ears. Or, would have, if my wings didn't get in the way. Stupid unwanted wings.

"Come on, Astrid, time to go," Hiccup quickly says.

I nod and he helps me onto his back. I cling to him for dear life because it's all that I can do.



"But, Hiccup, the gears-"

"Don't worry. just hold on."

"You dare leave me?" the Dragon Queen cried. "You dare defy your Queen? You are a weak Dragon! You will never amount to anything! You will forever be trapped in between worlds, never wanted anywhere! You have cursed yourself!

Her shouts don't have effect on me. They only make me angrier, actually. Any trace of wanting to protect this crazy Dragon is long gone.

I unfurl my tail and whip it back, then forward, sending a rainfall of spikes down at her. I suppose this does have a few perks... I still prefer my battle axe though and would trade it all away in a heartbeat.

Her eyes widen but she dodges each one with ease. I'm not too used to that, anyways.

"That's for luring me here," I snarl.

She snarls back, her lip curling in an ugly way.

While she is distracted with, well, hating me, I let go with one hand, pull back, think of the biggest mass of fire I can, and push.

This time, she isn't so lucky. That, or I am getting better at my speed. I don't see her through the fire and smoke. I know she's still alive. This won't be the last of her, I'm afraid.

"That's for everything else!" I shout.

"Going now, hold on!" Hiccup warns and I turn my focus back to holding on.

The Queen doesn't follow us out, and I'm not sure whether I should be grateful or worried.

\* \* \*

><p>"That's how it works. It's like a bee hive. We're the workers and that's our Queen."<p>

Since flying back, Hiccup hasn't shut up about anything. I wonder if he's ignoring the fact that I haven't said a word. I still can't shake the fact that my Dragon is a... I can't even say it. I shiver and lean into Hiccup. Something that I hate doing and would not normally do, mind you, but I can't help it.

"Hiccup?" I whisper.

"Yeah?"

"Please get me down."

I hate how small my voice sounds. I hate it. But I can't get those golden eyes out of my mind. Especially because they didn't scare me.

Oh, sure, the Nadder thing scared the living daylights out of me, enough to make me snap out of the Queen's control and my state of confusion, I guess. But the eyes...

They weren't mine, but they didn't scare me.

We reach the cove, and Hiccup stays still while I crawl down.

Hiccup arranges some sticks and blasts a fire for us. I huddle by it and Hiccup comes to sit next to me.

I should ask him to explain, I should ask him if he knew the whole time, I should ask him everything. But I don't.

"So... You...Bonded?" he asks.

"Uh huh," I say.

"Are you...okay?"

"No."

I stare into the fire. It burns my eyes but so would looking into his eyes. This is probably safest, anyways.

"I'm sorry. You were right, I never should have listened to that voice," I whisper.

"It's not your fault," he immediately denies. "She's a Queen. That's how things work."

"But I should have known better!" I cry, turning to him. "You warned me and I didn't listen. I should have been able to stop the Bonding! I've been holding it back for this long only for me to lose it! Don't you understand? I can't go back now. I can't be a Viking. And, according to the Queen, I'm a curse and am a weak Dragon."

"Uh, Astrid?"

"What?" I demand.

"Look," he sighs, pointing to the fire.

I turn my glare to it, and the small campfire has exploded into a raging bonfire. I blink in surprise, my anger diminishing. With it, so does the fire.

"What the..."

"Now would a weak Dragon be able to control a fire five feet away from her without the use of hands?" Hiccup smiles softly.

I shouldn't care that she called me a weak Dragon. What does that even mean, anyways? I don't even know. But it hurt. Even if there was a 'Dragon' at the end, someone had still called me weak. I am not weak, I have sworn to never be weak.

But I still care.

"So...how did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"You stopped the Bonding. How did you do it?"

"Stopped the-" I snort. "Hiccup, I didn't stop anything! Don't you see?"

I shove my arms out and my wings snap out. My eyes are flaring and I can feel them dilate in frustration.

"Actually, you did," he lowers my arms, which are right in front of his face. "All the Dragons I've seen lose their minds when they Bond. You were about to, but you didn't. How?"

I sigh and hang my head down. Do I really have to do this? I'd rather have round two with the Dragon Queen.

"I'm a Deadly Nadder." I explain.

"So?"

"No, you don't understand. That Dragon, specifically \_that \_Dragon, is why I have to be a Viking."

Hiccup gives me a questioning look and I look down, unwilling or unable, I'm not quite sure, to meet his eyes when I talk of my weakness. "When I was little, my parents were killed and taken by a flock of Deadly Nadders. When I went to live with my uncle, he Bonded a few years later with an Ancestral Flightmare. I am alone because of Dragons. But ever since the first incident, I can't..."

I physically \_can't \_say that I'm afraid of Nadders. My mind is trained- programmed- to deny any such thoughts of weakness. Fear is one such.

"It's okay, Astrid. I understand," Hiccup says.

I swallow and nod. "When I saw what I I had become...I realized that I was a monster. I don't want to be a monster. I have too many things to do. I have to fight it. I wasn't me, and I don't want to lose myself. Now, I don't have a choice. I can't go back like this. I can't be a Dragon, either. The Dragon Queen was right, I'm always going to be stuck between worlds. I don't belong anywhere."

I choke off. Mother of Odin, I can\_not \_be about to cry! I haven't cried since I was six years old, max. I do not cry!

And yet, I can't stop the burning in my eyes- no fire excuse this time- from surfacing, and a single tear makes its way down my cheek. I furiously rub it off but I know that he's seen.

"Gods I hate this," I say. "I don't want to be a beast, I don't want to be a monster. I don't want to be a \_Dragon.\_"

Hiccup smiles softly at me.

He points to the water.

"Look."

I sniff and cautiously wander over to the edge.

When I peer down into it, my blonde hair is just that- blonde hair, my arms are the same skinny but muscular arms they have always been, I don't have a tail with spikes on it. The gold in my eyes seemingly drains out, leaving a shade of gray that slowly fades into a familiar blue.

"What- how- I don't understand..."

Hiccup comes up behind me.

"Astrid, you're a miracle," he says plainly, as if he were telling me that the sky was blue.

"But, I don't-"

"You won," he says softly.

"You mean...I'm not a Deadly Nadder anymore?" I ask, bewildered.

"Well, I wouldn't say that," he points with his eyes down at the insides of my wrists. The scales are still there, only now they are a light blue. I don't mind, though. I'm not a Dragon, if only not yet.

"This is incredible!" I shout, cheering. I don't have to worry about any of this!

"I have never seen this before," Hiccup admits.

I suppose that Vikings are just as oblivious and passive towards the acclaimed Night Fury as Dragons are. As a Dragon, I shunned him for not behaving the same way I was, and therefore didn't notice nor care when he was panicked. Right now, I don't see the sadness his wings and ear flaps, or the small argument going on in his eyes. If I did notice, I wonder if I would have thought about whether he liked being invisible or not. Nobody really knew him. In a way, he didn't belong anywhere either. Invisible, whether he meant to be or not. But I don't notice, so I don't wonder.

"Wait...Hiccup, you flew on your own!" I exclaim.

"Yeah, I did... I did..." Hiccup slowly comes to realization.

"You flew, Toothless!" I playfully push his shoulder, but I can see his eyes lighting up. He won't have to be grounded anymore! He can fly now!

He looks down at his hands, flexing his fingers. Then, he experimentally launches himself in the air. His fingers click expertly as they navigate the gears, reaching down and falling for only a second before he's back to soaring and dipping and diving through the air.

I cheer him on, and he happily lands down a bit heavily right in front of me.

"How did that feel?" I ask.

"It felt...amazing," he replies, breathless.

I smile at him. His eyes are slightly dilated, looking very Dragon.

"Astrid, I..."

"What?" I ask after he trails off and seems like he won't begin again. I hope he's about to thank me for all the work I put into that. He better be.

"I have to say..."

"What?" I push.

He lifts his eyes to look into mine. I start to lose myself (not in the Dragon Queen way) in his eyes. I don't know why they are green. All Dragons' eyes are yellow- I mean, gold- and that should mean something, right? He's extraordinary, too. Just like me...

I should ask about his mother and the Dragons. I don't.

Suddenly, I remember everything that I had just confessed to him. About the Deadly Nadders, about becoming a mindless beast... I hadn't even thought of how Hiccup felt when he heard me say those things...

But I shouldn't care.

And that's what I keep reminding myself when I begin, "Hiccup-" and he cuts me off by vaulting into the air like a flash of black lightning, flapping his wings and using the speed of the Night Fury he is to carry himself as far away as possible. That's what I keep reminding myself when I wait here for nearly the whole night for him to come back and say goodbye. That's what I keep reminding myself when he doesn't.

That's what I keep repeating, what I keep telling myself, what I keep drilling into my head for days afterwards. \_I shouldn't care.\_

I also keep denying that I really do.

I'll tell you my new biggest secret (and if you tell a single soul- Dragon or Viking- then I will personally slit your throat with my battle axe): I am lying.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Well, I feel like this isn't really a good chapter but after rereading it, I feel sad, dis-contorted, confused, angry, happy (not very but a little bit), like the world around me is spinning, etc., so I guess that means that I actually did do a good job. I hope Astrid's OOCness wasn't too off-putting. Oh well, as long as you like it, right? Haha, not really, but you get the jest.<strong>

\*\*By the way, thanks for the crazy amount of reviews you all!\*\*

\*\*To that one guest (you know who you are... I hope): my major

apologies, but as of right now, it looks like you won't get an explanation until at least three more chapters so can I maybe have an extension of a deadline? Please?\*\*

\*\*Alright, see you all this Wednesday. Keep calm and Bond with an Ancestral Dragon! (Just pretend that works.)\*\*

## 11. How To Use Your Advantages

It's been three days, and feeling sorry for myself only lasts so long before my default emotion, anger, sets in. I suppose it's just Viking nature. It's not like I can help it, because that's what I am. Hiccup is a Dragon, he does not belong in my world. I am a Viking, I do not belong in his. After all, that was the plan, right? I taught him to fly again in exchange for keeping me secret? That's what it was, and that's all there is. Thinking that he had become my friend was just deceiving myself. We could never be friends. It's not in our chemical makeup. I mean, we didn't kill each other, and maybe I did think that he had become my friend, but what else can you expect from a Dragon?

Speaking of Dragons, luckily Bonding and Turning back again hasn't brought any sudden changes, other than the scales turning blue and an interesting craving for chicken.

"Astrid, wake up-

Gobber cuts himself off when I slam my door open, nearly hitting him square in the face.

"Well you're up bright and early," he comments, rubbing his jaw where it narrowly missed being hit.

I grunt in response and swing my axe over my shoulder. I'm not in the mood to talk, which I haven't been lately, but if he's noticed he hasn't said anything.

"Where you off to?" he hobbles behind me, but I walk faster.

"Training," I say curtly, grabbing a cup of mead from the table and downing it in one swig. I wipe my mouth with the back of my arm wrappings rather un-ladylike. "I'll be back in time for Training."

I'm out of the house, stumbling through the forge, and emerging in the brisk, cold Berk air before he gets the chance to speak.

Walking through the village, I keep my eyes down. It's not like I'm hiding anything, but when you've Bonded with a Dragon, it's kind of hard to act unsuspecting. Luckily, I normally march to my own beat, so nobody finds anything off.

\_Hiccup would... \_I think before I can vanish the contaminated thought from my mind.

\_Well that dreaded Night Fury isn't here, now, is he? \_I think back sourly. I also remind myself that I. Don't. Care.

"Stupid Dragons," I mutter, glaring at whatever happens to tick me off. (Perhaps the sky, simply because it isn't going to bring my not-friend back.)

After all these weeks of light training and a broken wrist, my throwing arm is a little weak. I'd been so busy that I hadn't had proper workouts in ages, and I intend to fix that in the span of this week, as nothing can be accomplished in one day.

The rest of the morning is spent between me, my axe, and a gaggle of some unfortunate trees.

\* \* \*

><p>"Astrid, you're up against the Gronkle today," Gobber announces.<p>

I nod once, showing that I had heard. My time in the ring has been getting less and less. All the Dragons seem to want to come at me, and I'm plenty fast enough to knock them out before they even get the chance to strike or fire.

I'm first. Honestly, the Gronkle is easy. It's slow and not very quick-witted. They have a low shot limit, which makes things easier. All I have to survive is six shots before I'm golden, and even then I can get the job done in two.

The other teens file out of the arena, crowding the edges to watch my round. The twins are shuffling around, Fishlegs is scrawling something down on some paper that I think is supposed to be a drawing (don't tell him but I've seen him draw and the boy can't scribble a stick figure to save his life) and Eret stoically watches me while ignoring Snotlout boast about his latest "accomplishment." This is exactly why I prefer Hiccup- I mean, to be alone. Give me a break, it's only been three days!

Gobber wishes me good luck before flipping the switch. The Gronkle comes bursting out, her ugly yellow-but-really-golden eyes are slit with anger from being woken from her nap. She sways on her wings, her bulky figure crashing into the walls of the arena clumsily.

It soon focuses on me, and I raise my axe. The Gronkle uneasily tastes the air, its jaw unhinging to reveal a set of razor sharp fangs.

Suddenly, it charges.

All I see are its eyes.

Gold, gold, gold. Just like mine were, just like mine were, just like mine were...

Just like Hiccup's weren't.

I freeze for a moment too long, and my element of surprise is shoved out the window. I scream at it and run to it. The Gronkle's eyes hesitate when it catches the glimmer of my axe, and I can see that it knows that I will kill it. I'm not really going to, but you can't really blame the Dragon in this case.

\_Do it, Astrid. Come on. It's not like you're killing it. It's not like it's Hiccup.\_

But the thing is, it is kind of like Hiccup. I'm not saying that he's still my friend, but I am saying that I can't attack a defenseless Dragon, especially when it's done nothing wrong. Maybe it's just Hiccup out there who's different, who still has his mind, but this Dragon is scared right now, and I can see it in its eyes.

Too late, the look changes and the Dragon's eyes change. They are once again thin slits, and its hands begin to glow an orange-red. I realize my mistake and quickly swing my axe, but before I can, the Gronkle charges me head on, knocking me to the ground and pinning me there, growling in my face with its rancid breath.

"Never trust a Dragon," I hiss at it, angry. The Dragon growls, but something catches its attention before it fires, and it quickly begins to sniff around me.

"Astrid!" I hear the others call, but they're too far away and won't be in time. I'm hoping I can figure something out so I don't get killed by the time they get to me.

I try to wiggle my arms free, and I'm so close, but the Dragon's hold is too tight. I grunt with the effort and it strains my limbs, but I can't give up. The Gronkle paws at my waist, and I freeze. I mean, seriously, it's a little (a very, very lot) uncomfortable and Dragon or not, it shouldn't be anywhere near my waist.

\_Go away, get away, don't kill me, please, don't kill me, I can't die like this, just get away, get away, get away! \_I plead/scream in my mind, still frantically wiggling.

Suddenly, the Dragon goes stiff. Its eyes widen in a dazed, glazed over expression, then it goes limp.

\_Oh sweet baby Thor in a thunderstorm, this Dragon is going to faint!\_

I struggle even harder, and with the loss of strength, I quickly wriggle out from underneath the Dragon, right in time for it to crash to the ground.

The Gronkle's still awake as far as I can tell, but it's like it's...asleep? Really, really, really content? I have no idea what just happened. Something drops and clangs against the ground, echoing through the whole arena. Breathing hard, I look over, and the teens and Gobber are just staring at me like I've sprouted wings...okay, not the best crack at a joke I've ever made.

I think it was Fishlegs who dropped his pencil.

"What. Are you guys. Staring at?" I growl in between breaths.

"I've never seen a Gronkle do that," Fishlegs states, both thoughtful and bewildered. "How did you do that?"

I don't have an answer to the question they all want to know, so instead of coming up with an excuse on the fly, I turn my head away, grab my axe, and stalk out of the arena.



Once I'm gone from sight, I break into a run. I don't know what caused the Gronkle to just faint like that. I wanted it to get away, to not kill me, and then that happened... Gods, Astrid, think of the facts.

Okay, so, it attacked me, then didn't blast me for some reason... it seemed distracted with smelling something. On me. Smelling. Hmm.

I decide that now might be a good time for a bath. It's not like a whole other Valkyries and shield maidens use the washhouse daily. I may be a Viking but I sincerely believe that good hygiene is of upmost importance. That and I can't get sick from hyperthermia or germs at all because I can't and I won't take a sick day.

My axe goes with me as I head to the washhouse, keeping an eye out for Vikings searching for me. The ones that pass don't meet my eye anyway. I guess there are some perks to having such a sob story of a background and a cursed family name.

My face burns with shame when I realize that the Deadly Nadder has only increased the misfortune its brought to my family. \_Good,\_ I think. \_I should be feeling bloody awful.\_

I dress down and change into a night dress, the one I rarely use, and dump my clothes on a bench. I have to spend a few minutes heating up the water but it's totally worth it when I get in and the warm, soothing water washes over me and I feel like I can relax. I keep my arms out of the water with my wrappings still on, just in case someone does show up.

It's a nice relaxing place, just being in the warm water. It's not like I have any other place to relax.

After some time later, I dry myself off with a large cloth and slip into my nightdress once again. My clothes are dirty, so I'll have to wash my shirt and leggings with the remainder of the warm water and scrub off my leather skirt with some oils.

My shirt and leggings don't take long, and before I know it, I have them hanging on the racks to dry. My skirt is another story, as the thing is caked with mud and dirt from the arena and could use a good conditioning. I take a scrub brush to it for a few minutes, breaking into a sweat by the time I'm done. Before I wash it out with water, I go through the pockets attached to my belt, making sure nothing gets damaged.

That's when the grass flutters out.

It's dry and crinkled, nearly colorless. I pick it up. I remember this. I allow myself to think back to when Hiccup and I had found this. It was like catnip for Dragons...Dragon nip, I called it. That must have been what the Gronkle responded to, and why all the other Dragons have been deliberately singling me out! I always knocked them out before they got too close, so I never remembered until now, I guess. Dragon nip. Who knew?

I suppose it's technically cheating. Having it makes me more of a target, giving me more chances for them to attack, as well as if I don't manage to knock them out, a failsafe way to make it out alive.

I don't want an unfair advantage, I want to win my right fair and square.

I pick up the grass, preparing to toss it into the drain pipe. I pause, just before sprinkling it in. I don't know why, but I can't get rid of it. It's so annoying. But, how bad can it be? If it gives me just a little advantage, I might as well take it, right? There's nothing wrong or suspicious about having a few blades of dead grass around in your pocket.

The scent has dulled largely when I bring it to my nose to smell, but it is still strangely pleasurable. I wonder if it's just to Dragons. They have sharper senses of smell, so it makes sense that the Gronkle would sniff it out when I could no longer.

I sigh heavily, placing the grass back in the pouch. Cleaning can wait. I want to go test it out.

Luckily, it's quite warm in the washhouse so I don't have to wait long for my clothes to dry. I quickly change and grab my axe, rushing back out to the village. It's nearing dusk, so I won't have much time. I'm normally out late so it won't come as a surprise to Gobber when he has to leave my dinner outside my bedroom door, but I still don't have any time to waste.

I shuffle over, wishing that all my metal and shoulder pads didn't make so much noise.

The arena is quiet, and nobody's there. I still give everything a double check before I deem it all clear and enter the arena. My footsteps echo around the circular dome, the metal chains seem to rattle with every step and my metal seems even more noisy. Everything is just so \_loud.\_

I check to see that all the doors are closed. It's dark now, I'm wasting precious time.

I look at my axe, remembering the reflection that brought me back to my senses when I had Bonded. I wonder...

This is a bad idea. I mean a really, really, really bad idea, and it goes against everything I've ever told myself. Still, I can't help but want to know. I can handle it this time, I know I can.

I lay my axe down and slowly unwrap my scales. I feel like I'm doing something out of code. Oh wait, I am. But there's nothing saying that if I haven't Bonded I have to be killed. Nobody's ever taken this long to Bond.

I suck in a breath and tilt forward on my tiptoes, then rock back.

"Alright, Astrid. Remember who you are. You are a Viking, and you are not a Dragon. You can do this," I blow out through a small hole in my mouth, trying to focus on Draconic thoughts. It's a little harder than one might imagine, as all my brain's ever been trained to do is \_not \_think about Dragons.

"Okay. Ready?" I ask to no one in particular. I try to breathe evenly, making sure no one's watching one final time.

"Bond," I command myself, stretching out my arms and squeezing my eyes shut.

My scales tingle at the alien exposure to the crisp, cold air, but nothing more. Nothing happens.

I pull my arms back in, checking for anything. Nothing.

I try once more, trying as hard as I can. Again, nothing. And again, and again, and again.

"Maybe it's for the best," I say out loud. And it should be. I should be overjoyed that I can't Bond when I actually try wholeheartedly to. But for some reason, I'm not washed over with relief like I know I should be. I rewrap my arms, my blue scales disappearing to the world. I am once again Astrid Hofferson, the tough Viking who lost her family to the Dragons. I am no longer Astrid, the scared girl who is turning into a Dragon. For one scary moment, I'm not quite sure who I would miss more if I got stuck as one or the other. But scary moments only last for so long, because I am a Viking. It's all I've ever wanted to be. My future is bright, I'm not jeopardizing it for anything.

I breathe out once again, watching the air turn it into fog. In the trick of the light (er, I mean, dark), it looks like the flicker of a flame before it disperses.

\_Now for what I really came here for.\_

I take out the blades of Dragon nip, taking a whiff myself just to make sure the scent is still there. It is, though faint, I'm sure it will be plenty strong for a Dragon. I had been doing some research about the five most common Dragons we have in Berk, and the- gulp- Deadly Nadder seems to be the one with the best sense of smell. I'm not going to admit a petty fear to anyone- least of all myself, so the Deadly Nadder it will be.

"Stick to its blind spot," I remind myself, heaving up the wood. At the very last minute, I think, \_this is a really, really bad idea.\_

Well a little late for that one, now, don't you think?

The Nadder bursts out, crying out as loud as it can. I immediately press my hands to my ears.

"Shut up, they'll hear!" I cry. The purple Nadder flies about, frantically rattling the chains as it tries desperately to escape.

People are sure to hear, how can they not? With that Dragon's shrieking...

"Ugh, enough!" I shout, allowing whatever it is inside me out and shooting my hands out towards the Nadder squawking above the ground. A white hot fire tinged with orange comes firing out and towards the Dragon, effectively shutting it up by knocking it to the ground.

There is silence for a moment, and I can't believe that nobody has come running. I guess I got lucky. I'll have to do better, luck can only get a Viking so far.

The Dragon groans, reminding me that its humanity is male.

"Oh, sorry," I tell it in a whisper-yell. I'm still slightly frazzled because, hello? I just shot freaking \_magnesium flames \_from my hands!

Not that I haven't done it before, but still. It's a little freaky.

He groans again and picks himself up, shaking out hiss wings and dragging hiss spine tail across the ground. At first, he starts to preen- vain Dragon- then remembers that there's someone else with him.

The Nadder slowly turns its golden gaze to me, laying his wings flat and sizing me up. He knows me from Dragon Training, so I don't know why he's so bold. I must have beaten him at least a dozen times. He takes a timid step towards me, his spines raised and poised to strike.

"Hey, easy," I take a step back, showing it my hands. Hopefully it will tell the Dragon that I didn't really mean to blast him out of the sky and don't intend to again. "Please be quiet, they'll hear you...and they'll put you back in the cage."

Somehow, the Nadder seems to understand this, as he perks up and looks around, taking extra precaution to be quiet.

"There you go, easy," I tell it.

Oh dear gods, if my parents and Uncle Finn could see me now. Not only being in the same arena without attacking a Dragon- a Deadly Nadder, no less!- but actually talking to it. Oh my, what shame am I.

Well, I'm already tied to this mast, might as well make it to the end of the world.

I reach up with my left hand, the Nadder's eyes narrowed and watching my every move. I slowly take my axe out. He leans low to the ground, like he's preparing to attack.

Very, very slowly, I set the axe down on the ground.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I tell the Nadder. He seems to recognize it, and drops his caution. He goes back to preening his wings, and I let out a breath.

Also painstakingly slowly, I make my way around to the Nadder's side. Completely away from its blind spot, the very same advice I gave to myself not two minutes ago.

The Nadder pauses, but doesn't look up. I pause as well, and after a moment, he proceeds, paying me no mind.

I keep inching forward, reaching in my belt for the Dragon nip. As soon as I open my pouch, the Dragon's head snaps up.

"What's this, huh?" I ask, smiling just slightly. I have his full attention now, and he looks like he wants to take a step towards me. I know he can smell it.

He cackles, his eyes widening with each passing second.

Suddenly, he charges at me. It takes all my willpower not to run to my axe and defend myself. But he's not a threat. That's what I keep reminding myself as a wild borne, trapped for decades Nadder comes running at me with his wings spread and his fanged mouth opened.

But it stops just before it gets to me, and again, I have to restrain myself from moving when it tilts its head to the side to look at me.

"Here," I offer the Dragon nip to it. The Dragon inhales the air, leaning forward. I bend down to scatter it on the ground, then take a few scurried steps back. The Nadder gets down on its hands and knees, smelling the ground a little before cackling in delight and rolling around.

I have to stifle a laugh, it's not like the Dragon doesn't look ridiculous. Even with the wings, he still kind of looks like a Viking, and seeing a fully grown Viking rolling around on the ground is not exactly a common sight.

But I've learned what I wanted to know, now for the time to go.

Great. I didn't exactly get to this in the entire ordeal...

How to get it back? Come on, think, think. The perfect memory comes to mind.

\_"See? All gone."\_

\_"You sure?"\_

\_"Yes. I'm sorry, I didn't know you were afraid of eels."\_

\_"Most Dragons are..."\_

"I've got just the thing," I say, quickly running and sneaking out under the iron door. It takes a little longer than I would have liked, but eventually, I find it.

I go rushing back into the arena, where the Nadder is still rolling around in glee.

"Alright," I say as loudly as I dare. The Dragon sends me an unhappy look but otherwise doesn't pay attention.

"I have to ask you to go back into your cage," I tell it. He seems to understand that. He growls protectively, warning me by raising the spines on his tail. "You asked for it."

I bring the eel out from behind my back, and the Dragon growls, reluctant to show fear.

"Go on," I take a step towards it and the Nadder backs up. I herd it into its cage, where eventually I throw the eel in so I can close the door. Right before I close the door, I happen to catch sight of the Dragon.

It is really the most pitiful thing I have ever seen.

The Dragon has his arms folded around his knees as he cowers in the corner, with his wings wrapped around. His tail curls up, the spines completely harmless while sheathed. But the saddest part is his face. His golden eyes are sorrowful, as if he really knew that this would happen. It only adds to the fear, and he looks just...scared. Like Hiccup had been. Like I had been.

I tear my gaze away, furrowing my brow. It's not like I could do anything for the Dragon.

But that's when I hear it.

One, small, snuffle in the dark, in the hushed quiet. The impossible has already happened, I'm beyond impossible. But this is just... I don't even have the words to describe it. I can't help but feel pity down to my very core as I realize that the Dragon is \_crying. \_Who knows how many nights it happens? Who knows if all the Dragons cry to themselves, for their lost freedom, for their lost families, for their lost everything, at night? Because, what we Vikings keep forgetting is that they're only half Dragon. That means that they're half Viking as well, and therefore half human. We all have our fears, even Dragons. But combine it with the animalistic instincts and the heart wrenching emotions of humanity and I can't imagine having to cope.

What is wrong with me? I'm not usually so emotional. I'm rock hard, a brick, a wall, a castle made of stone. Why am I feeling pity for a Dragon?

\_Because while it's a Dragon, it's still a human being.\_

Yes, I've been over this.

And as the Nadder softly weeps in its cage, I finally realize that Dragons, they're not really so bad. In the end, they're not so different from us.

I may be the stone warrior, but I'm still a human being, too. Which is why I fling open the doors, stalking over to the iron gates and wrenching them open. I march back over and snatch the eel away, stepping to the side.

The Nadder looks up from sobbing to give me a confused look.

"Go," I say.

It blinks.

"Get out of here!" I shout at it.

It begins to dawn on the Nadder that he's just been given a free ticket to, well, freedom, and he stands, gazing longingly at the open night sky.

"Go," I repeat. "I'll take care of your cage."

I summon all the fury and emotion and plain out frustration that I've been feeling for the past three days, and hurl it at the cage doors. They blast in one brilliant explosion, making it look like a decent and successful jailbreak.

I turn to find the Nadder pitifully stumbling its way to the gates, a determined look in its eyes.

There goes the Dragon to freedom, never to look back on its prison again. I find it shocking how much I envy that Dragon.

Shouts ring around the village. Sure, they all woke to \_that \_but not the shrieking cries of a Dragon as it flew around the arena, because that wouldn't make sense at all.

"Hurry!" I tell it, following it out at a reasonable distance. When it leaves, I can't be here when they come to see that one of their Dragons has escaped, nor do I want to be.

But even more to my surprise, right before it leaves, the Nadder stops and turns around.

It looks into my eyes, and I could swear that for an eighth of a half of a second, its eyes flicker blue.

"Th-th-tha-ank yo-ou, A-A-A-Ast-tri-tr-id." he speaks.  
\_Speaks.\_

Then the Nadder throws himself into the skies and doesn't look back, leaving me as bewildered as I've ever been.

He said my name.

The shouts become louder, and I grab my axe before darting out of the arena. Like the Nadder, I don't look back as I run the long way home through the forest.

He said my name.

Of course he must have heard it during Training, but he had bothered to try and learn it. Stoick and Gobber always told that the Dragons they had were wild borne only. But the Dragon not only knew my name, but how to say 'thank you.' Perhaps...perhaps, was there hope for the future of Dragons, after all?

I can't think too much on it. Right now, I have more important issues to deal with. Maybe some other unfortunate Viking can deal with the Dragons, but it's not going to be me. I can't, and I won't.

But that doesn't change the fact that he still said my name.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Can I just skip the apologies and fly away on my Ancestral Flightmare before you all come hunting me down with pitchforks and fire? I am really sorry that I left you all hanging for two weeks, and then plopped a filler chapter on you, but

hopefully it was a good filler chapter, huh?<strong>

**\*\*Lots of you are going to be like, why didn't Astrid free all the other Dragons? Well, she didn't, so please don't flame up on me. There are reasons, everybody! So, this is going to be my update for the week, I have a huge English paper I have to worry about, but hopefully after this week, keep your fingers crossed that I can begin on an actual update-ever-Wednesday-schedule.\*\***

**\*\*Oh, and to Rumbling Night Cutter, I promised a detailed description of Hiccup's prosthetic because it's a little unclear, but, as you can read, Hiccup's not in this chapter so it's a little hard. When Hiccup comes back I'll give you one, does that work for everyone?\*\***

**\*\*Anyway, thanks for sticking with my excruciating lack of updates and hope you all are enjoying the story so far! \*\***

## 12. How To Realize You're Not The Only One

Here's the thing; I'm not a hero. I'm not a chief, I'm not a Dragon Queen, and I'm really not a hero. Which is why I know that it's not my responsibility to solve the case of the Dragons. And that's why I eventually dismissed the Deadly Nadder who said my name from my mind altogether.

However, the fact that the Nadder had escaped is still causing quite the ruckus. Luckily, nobody had seen me running away. All night long, the Deadly Nadder had been on my mind. The other Vikings have accepted that the Dragon had made a successful escape. Nobody would think that one of their own had helped it, and why should they? There were the scorch marks to prove it, and Vikings hated Dragons. That's the way it's always been, that's the way it always will be.

\_Not always, \_my mind whispers.

\_You shut up, \_I think back.

My axe rests upon my shoulder as I walk through town. My arm wrappings are filthy, and I'll have to get new ones, soon. I don't like the thought of that. They'll want to size my arms for perfection when I just want to buy a pair and move on, who cares about perfection when it comes to clothes?

While taking the long way home last night, I had stopped by the fields where Hiccup and I had crashed and picked a fresh new batch of Dragon nip. Training's in a few minutes so I figure I'll be able to use it.

On the way, I pause to stop behind the house of a random Viking. There, I just take a deep breath.

"Today's the day," I breathe, blowing my bangs out of my face. "This time. This time, for sure."

Today's the last day of Training. And I'm the star student. There is no doubt that I'm going to have to kill the Nightmare. I'm afraid that I won't be able to kill the Dragon, but I can't afford not to. I double check the pouch around my waist, making sure that it's stuffed



with Dragon nip. Not that I'd need it.

\_Defeat the Dragon, today, Astrid. That's all you have to do. Don't think about the Nightmare. \_\_Dragons aren't Hiccup. They don't all speak. The Nadder was just something that happened. You will defeat the Dragon, you will become a true Viking, and you will not succumb to the Dragon inside you.\_

Easier said than done, just saying.

However, the Dragon inside me had been particularly quiet. It hasn't said anything. I'm a little concerned, in all honesty. It's not because I miss it, but what if it's biding its time and strength to break out at the most inopportune moment?

But I can control it. It took a Dragon Queen to bring it out, I can keep it in.

"You're ready. You can do this."

"Astrid!" Gobber calls when I make my way to the crowded arena. Everyone wants to see the last part of Dragon Training and who will get the honor of killing the Monstrous Nightmare. "There you are, lass. Thought for a minute you were gonna skip out."

"Who me? Never," I respond, faking a smile. He takes it as I'm nervous.

"Hey, don't tell the others, but you don't need to be nervous. You've got the best chance out there."

I don't tell him that that's exactly what I'm afraid and proud of. How two seemingly opposite emotions can combine into a perfectly logical explanation in beyond me. Then again, I was never too good at logic, anyway.

I just give a small nod, narrowing my eyes so he has no chance at seeing the battle behind them.

The arena is scattered with wooden barriers, I'm assuming so we can hide behind them. The other teens are goofing off in the corner. Well, most of them. Eret is standing against the wall. To be perfectly honest, he doesn't seem too interested in Dragon fighting. He's never motivated enough. For such a strong guy, he's awfully wary of frontal assaults.

"Let the training begin!" Gobber shouts from above the ring that I am now in. I don't know where the other teens are, but I suppose that's the point.

I hear the creaking of the boards being removed from somewhere and I know the Dragon's going to be coming out soon. I don't hear the tiny caw of the Terror, and the Nightmare's the one we'll be facing tomorrow. It doesn't sound like the Nadder- oh, right.

So that leaves Gronkle or Zippleback.

"Please be a Gronkle, please a Gronkle," I whisper, leaning against the barrier and shutting my eyes. Gronkles seemed especially susceptible to the Dragon nip and they're easy enough to take

down.

I peek out behind and see a thin layer on green tinted gas. A flash of a golden eye flies across my vision and I jerk back.

"Son of a half troll," I mumble unhappily. It just had to be the Zippleback. In all honesty, after encountering the male Nadder, the species didn't seem so bad. I could think of them and no longer be reminded of my parents. I was just reminded of...well, I hate to admit it, but I'm reminded of me.

And as much as I'll deny it and fight it and scratch at it, the 'me' that I'm reminded of isn't all that bad.

That just left Zipplebacks. Don't get me wrong, I don't hate them with a burning passion, but they were difficult. Not necessarily smart, but you know what they say, two heads, twice the status. Pictures of an Ancestral Zippleback were honestly a bit horrifying, and I can't imagine something having two heads. That's just so unnaturally wrong that my mind can't wrap around it. I can get the pairs thing, but the flying solo without each other doesn't make sense. By all definition, they should be able to fly just fine without another Zippleback, but they just...can't.

I remember a couple years ago, when I was watching the bigger Vikings go after Dragon, someone shot down a Zippleback. The gas breather, I think. The other one flapped its wings, but it was too shocked to think to soar away. It just kept flapping madly but falling faster and faster until it hit the ground. It kept trying to launch back into the air but it just couldn't fly.

At the time, I thought that maybe a Zippleback should be my first aim at a kill. If I get one, the other can't get away. Plus, I'd have two Dragons on my belt. But now, for a Dragon not so abundant in the mental area, they work well. It's like they can read each other's mind, yet act on their own. The feat may seem amazing, but it just doesn't make sense.

Maybe it's all in their mind.

I hear Fishlegs scream in a very undignified manner and roll my eyes. Guess that's my cue.

I quickly stand up and summersault over to the next barrier. Alright, first off, know the Dragon you're facing. Zippleback, they're a pair. One can't fly without another head, so they're downed when apart.

I can't remember how far apart they have to be... Oh great. Just my day, the one time my brain fails me to remember something. Might as well think that it's a good idea to separate them, but they will fight to the very end to keep that from happening, so that's a no-go.

Best way to defeat them? Um...let them get the Dragon nip and club them on the head?

Well, it's the only plan I've got.

I leap to another barrier and peak out. I can see Tuffnut attempting to battle one head, but the Dragon keeps zooming around with a look

that looks despicably like glee.. This is a stealth Dragon, the only way to beat it is to best it at its own game.

They're both entertaining themselves with Tuffnut, so I have a clear path straight behind them. I wait no time in ducking and diving between the barriers, waiting until I'm right behind one.

I'm only a few barriers away when the smell reaches one of them. I can hear the Zippleback take a whiff of the air, breathing in contently.

"Come on," I murmur. I count to three before standing up and swinging with the sharp side down, so I'll only whack into something and not cleave their head straight off. Not that I've ever done that. Never gotten the chance, yet.

I hit home, feeling something heavy. At the same time, the arena goes silent. A blast of Zippleback gas must have made its way into the air, because it settles around the gate. When it clears, the gate is gone, knocked over with scorch marks.

I almost take a step back. Looking down, one of the Zipplebacks is lying on the floor, completely still. For a moment I want to check its heartbeat, but I refrain. The gates were open. Everyone's looking at the Zipplebacks because they just blasted the gates off the arena.

No one moves, not even the one Dragon that's still conscious. Its golden eyes are slit and it's looking straight at the gate. This one is female. Surprisingly, she's not too buff. Merely muscular. The Zippleback on the ground is male, but he's still not moving. The female has a bit more blue around her scales and on the tips of her wings, where the male is more green. This is really the first time I've ever looked at them.

The female suddenly croaks, loudly, letting a few wisps of green, toxic gas unfurl from her fingertips. Gas breather. That means that the unconscious male is the gas igniter. Not entirely sure why that matters.

She lifts her head abruptly, calling out to the sky and raising her wings to full height. The Ancestral Zippleback had four legs, so they have their wings on their backs, right between their shoulder blades. Like the Night Fury.

No, no like the Night Fury. Because I don't even know what the actual Night Fury looks like. I'm not supposed to know that he's a boy my age, or that his mother is the Dragon Queen who terrorizes all the Dragons, and I'm certainly not supposed to be missing him because I. Don't. Know. Him.

The female Zippleback suddenly starts to run towards the exit. At first, nobody does anything. I'm shocked, really. But us Vikings are all stunned. Normally, we counter this with speed on the battlefield, but we're all a little unsure what to do. We've never had a Zippleback break free before.

She suddenly gets the room and she spreads her wings, frantically flapping them and... tripping and nearly falling.

She suddenly realizes that her second head is unconscious on the floor. She looks back and calls out to him, but he's still knocked out. She swivels her head to glance back out at the open gates.

That's when the Vikings suddenly realize what's going on, and they start pouring into the arena.

She stares back at the skies for one more second. She could leave. She can run, she doesn't need to fly to run away. She might be clumsy but even still she'd be faster than us Vikings. It's all in her blood. She's a Dragon. She should be out of there. She could easily find another head and be free from her unclear but inevitable death here with us. If she ran, she would make it. I guess that's why the Vikings suddenly snapped out of it. Me, myself, I'm still a little frozen.

If the female Zippleback ran, if she spread her arms and released a cloud of gas, she'd be gone and there would be nothing stopping her from freedom. But her second head is still on the floor. She would not be able to fly until she found another head. It wouldn't be hard. There are plenty.

And yet, I may be the only one to show it, but I am not the only one surprised by what she does. The Zippleback turns away from the open gates and runs and fights her way through the sea of Vikings- back to her mate who would not be able to get away in time. Back to her unclear but inevitable death.

She snarls at the other Vikings while she stands protectively over her mate. With her trapped in an enclosed area and fighting off Vikings from one stance, it doesn't take long to overpower her. She and her mate are soon dragged back to their cages. I think the male's still alive. They wouldn't have put him back in if he wasn't.

Oh gods. The weight of what just happened hit me full in the face. I would have swayed, but my face was blank and my eyes expressionless. I would not let anyone into my head right now, so my body sort of shut itself down.

If I hadn't knocked out that Dragon, the Zipplebacks would be free right now. Who knows? Maybe they can talk, too. Maybe they conspired to escape together. But I ruined it. And now they're trapped.

A part of me says 'good. They're Dragons, they should be dead,' but what scares me is that a larger part of me feels guilty. Horribly guilty.

But the main reason of why I almost sway is the very reason that had everyone frozen. The Zipplebacks blasted their way to freedom.

But I know better.

Those gates didn't open because of the Zipplebacks' fire. No one would suspect this option because who in their right mind would help a couple of Dragons escape? No one, that's who. But the Dragons' fire didn't open the gate. Someone else did.

And that meant that I wasn't the only one who knew the truth about the Dragons.

I had to go see those Zipplebacks tonight

\* \* \*

><p>After spending the rest of the day waiting for a reschedule and studying up on Zipplebacks from the Dragon Manual, it was starting to get dark.<p>

I chewed on a chicken leg in my room while flipping through the pages. I didn't notice that I had gone through almost all of the book before it was too late.

Night Fury.

Unknown, unknown, unknown.

How is it that we know so little about Hiccup? About the Dragons in general? Now that he was gone, there was no way I'd ever be able to go back to the nest and find out what the Dragon Queen meant when she talked about the Dragons' secret. I was a little too occupied with desire to serve her to think too much about what she was saying. Not my fault, though, blame the Nadder inside me.

Huh. Who would have thought that that'd be so easy to think? I mean, of course I would never say it, but it's gotten much too easy. I'll have to redouble my efforts.

I pushed the plate away and closed the book, tired of staring at the blank Night Fury pages. There's still so much I didn't know about Hiccup...

But I don't care, remember? Gah. Stupid brain. Always betraying me at the worst possible moments. Is it absolutely necessary we have these things?

Don't answer that.

Gobber has been banging away on weapons all day long. It seems like the Nadder jailbreak and the Zippleback almost-escape has everyone on edge. However, it's been great business for Gobber, as everyone is wanting an upgrade to their weapons. I feel kind of bad for not being able to help him, but if he knew what I was really up to, he wouldn't even want to be near me. The thought makes me burn with shame, but I force it down. I need to talk to those Zipplebacks. I'm just going to have to pray they can talk.

I slip down to the forge, listening to the steady, rhythmic beats of metal clanging against metal. I take a step, but unfortunately, Gobber sees me.

"Hello, Astrid," he greets.

"Uh...hey, Gobber."

"Got a load of business, want to help out?"

Okay, now I really feel bad.

"Sorry," I say slowly, "but I can't. I was going to go do some late

night training."

"Ah, I see. Hey, don't tell anyone this, but tomorrow's gonna be the Gronkle." he smiles and winks at me.

The least I can do is give him a genuine smile. So I do. Although, I'm not quite sure if it looks right, because Gobber's smile twitches just slightly in one corner. Is it sad that I realize that I'm not even sure what my real smile feels like anymore? The life of a Viking. Except Gobber, but we all know he's special.

I dip my head down and quickly exit the forge, not wanting to stay any longer. I don't think I could handle it.

The walk is silent, and I don't have to worry about too many people out in the open. Which comes as a surprise to me, as I'd think that we would want to be on extra precaution but what do I know, right?

There is a replacement gate already set. It wouldn't hold against too many hits but it'll suffice for what I need.

I have an eel by the gate just in case this doesn't work, and a fresh sprig of Dragon nip in my pocket. Let's hope the Zipplebacks are in a cooperative mood tonight- for all of us.

Under the cover of night, I easily make my way into the dark arena. Once I'm in, the Training grounds are illuminated by the moon. When it's not cloudy, I've got to give it to Berk; it sure has some nice nights.

I waste no time in opening the cage with the Zipplebacks. Unlike the Nadder, they don't come racing out in a flurry of wings, scales, claws, and noise. In fact, they don't even come out at all. I slowly peer into their cage, scanning the darkness for two silhouettes. A pair of golden eyes meet mine.

I blink and step back. A second pair blinks open, their slit pupils focused directly on me.

"Easy, I'm not here to hurt you," I tell them.

One of the eyes makes a hissing noise and languidly comes out into the light. It's the female Zippleback. She takes another tentative step forward, like she's expecting a trap. Can't say that I blame her. Like a green serpent slithering out of its hole, she pokes her face out in the moonlight, eyes rapidly darting to and fro in hunt of danger. When she spies none, only then does she fully step out.

The Zippleback calls to her mate and he slithers out as well. The side of his head is dark in the night, and I cringe, sending a mental 'sorry'. I offer the fish to them when their focus settles back on me.

This time, it's the male who comes first.

I force my limbs to stay relaxed in their outstretched position, fixing my gaze on the ground so I won't have to stare at the Dragons before me. It's unnerving, being in the same enclosed area of Dragons. Just because I had successfully gone about and not gotten

myself killed in front of two Dragons before doesn't mean that I'm happy to throw myself in front of another one, let alone two.

Unlike Hiccup, he slowly claws the fish out of my hands, shrinking back when it hits the ground. I take a few steps back so he can retrieve the fish and drag it back to his mate. They quickly devour it in ten seconds flat, licking their lips and lashing their tails at me. I don't know whether or not that's a good sign, so I take it as one and proceed with my plan. Or, what sounds like a plan to my mind and is really just a half-formed idea that I hope will work.

"Hi there," I say cautiously. The male gulps and produces a deep growling sound from his throat. It doesn't sound threatening and his eyes are widely dilated, so I continue. "In the arena, someone opened the gate, didn't they?"

The female flicks her head and beats her wings a couple of times. They both stare at me, giving no presentiment of understanding.

"Okay, do you know who helped you? Can you give me names?"

They both eye me. I can't read their gazes. There's nothing particularly human in their facial features that clue me in that they understand me.

"I promise, I'm not here to rat them out. I just want to know.

Nothing.

"Please?"

Nothing.

"Do you want to go back in your cages?"

They glance at me, but they aren't utterly concerned.

"Can you say something?" I throw my hands up in frustration.

"\_Hrr,\_ " says the female, spraying a miniature cloud of green gas in the air. The male immediately lifts his head, lifting his wrist to send small sparks crackling out of his fingertips. The cloud explodes. It still doesn't make sense on how dependent on one another Zipplebacks truly are. I don't understand why they can't function properly without another Zippleback. They have wings, a way of protection, all the right Dragon properties, and yet they just...don't.

I sigh and sit down. I can't set the Zipplebacks free. That would cause too much suspicion. But they didn't help me. And I don't even know if they can.

"Ugh!" I cry out, slamming my fist into the wall and cringing when I realize too late what a bad idea that was.

All of a sudden, the Zipplebacks' eyes dilate into black slits, staring at me. They simultaneously stand, hissing. I don't realize

it, but when I do, they don't look quite so harmless.

I stand as well, panicking only slightly. It wouldn't be fair to fight them, and the eel's over by the door. My axe is strapped to my back, but I don't want to use it unless absolutely necessary.

"Come on, now, I'm not here to hurt you. I brought you a fish, remember?"

The female raises her hands and gas shoots straight out at me, and the male is quick to send showers of crackling sparks following.

I leap out of the way. If I can keep them occupied...

"What was that?"

"I think it was the Dragons!"

"Are they escaping again?"

"Quick, to the arena!"

Okay, worst is coming. The stupid Dragons woke nearly the whole village! I run to a gate and use my axe to crank it open so I can slide underneath. An explosion sounds from behind me, where I was only moments ago.

I sneak into the shadows, running as fast as I can.

Of course I manage to trip going out, knocking over a whole set of weapons. Metal weapons.

"What was that?"

Screw subtly, I need to get out of there \_fast.\_

I hear them behind me. I can't stop making noise! I push faster. I can outrun them, but they can track me and hear me. I'm really hoping they don't know who I am. If I parade through the village they'll find me, and they're chasing me into the woods. The only option is to...run further into the woods. The very same place I swore I wouldn't go again.

So what? I didn't want to see the reminder that I wasn't really all Viking, that some part of me was a Dragon- was turning into a Dragon. But this was my only option, and I know of a place to go for the night, or as long as I need to.

That was that, then. I was going back to the cove.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Really sorry for the rush at the very end, I am running out of time and need to do my homework. I'll try to go back and fix it later. Anyway, hello! On time now, right? Funny that I'm making Zipplebacks such a big character in this. Zipplebacks are honestly one of my least favorite Dragons from the movie... Oh well. It works, right?<strong>

\*\*See you all next Wednesday, please let me know what you think!



Thank you for the crazy amounts of Follows! Next chapter may or may not include what you all are waiting for...\*\*

### 13. How To Find What You're Not Missing

The first thing that stupidly comes to my mind is that I can't breathe.

Okay, so I actually can breathe, I just think that I can't. But it sure feels a whole lot like someone dropped me from twenty feet in the air and I landed on my back, effectively knocking the wind out of me. But I really feel like I can't breathe. I'm not going to die or anything, but I might as well be. Getting the wind out of me is basically not breathing, and not breathing feels a whole awful lot like dying. Or so I'm told.

But the main reason that I feel like I can't breathe sadly isn't because I got knocked to the ground from twenty feet up or simply that I'm back in the cove where I first befriended a downed Dragon (although I'd very much prefer the two to this), it's because said downed Dragon is actually here.

I run into the cove, only to sense something off. Really off. Fine, not really off, but more like the tingling sensation you get when you can feel someone watching you. The thing was, though, I wasn't really being watched. It was me who was doing the watching...or however one would state that. I get to the cove and immediately stop in my tracks.

The Night Fury is crouching at the water, staring at the fish. I'm honestly really surprised he hasn't noticed me yet.

I can leave. Surely, getting questioned by a whole village of Vikings is preferable to this, right? ...Right?

I don't really know. To be honest, something in me really wants to talk to him. But I know that that's not right and I most certainly do not want to talk to that useless half-reptile. I have much better things to do than talk to the Dragon who deserted me. But then, he really didn't desert me. After he learned how to fly, there was nothing keeping him from leaving. That was the point of it all, right? There was nothing keeping him back...but I almost wished there had been. But he's a Dragon and I can't expect any more or any less. They're just not the same, no matter if we're wrong about them. They might not be mindless beasts, but they're just not the same.

I can leave. I can turn around right now and pray that he doesn't hear me. And if he does, then I pray that I get enough of a head start that he'll have to fly through the woods, which we both know that he can't really do that fast enough to keep up with me, who knows the wood like the back of my hand. (Who came up with that saying, really? Does anyone honestly know the back of their hand all that well? I don't. Not really. I can't think of one Viking who does. Plus, it's kind of weird, if you really think about it...) But I'm faster than him on the ground. Especially with his wings holding him back. He may be nimble and lightning fast as the Night Fury but as a scrawny, fifteen year old boy, he's a little out of luck.

But then I could also stay and ask about what the Dragon Queen was

trying to tell me when I was a little busy with Bonding and hanging on her every word. Which is kind of ironic, if you think about it, that I was so focused on her and yet I can't really remember what she was trying to say. I could learn if I just stayed and asked... But I have to remind myself that I don't want to stay.

\_What's the harm? It'd just be taking advantage of your resources, like with the Dragon nip. Come on, Astrid, this is your chance to find out the truth. To find the information you're seeking.\_

\_But what even is the information I'm seeking? It's not my job to save the Dragons, or the Vikings. It's just my job to chose my battles and fight them. To be a Viking. This, this would not be being a Viking.\_

\_But think of all the knowledge you could gain, the upper hand. It's just the big, bad Night Fury. You're not afraid.\_

\_It's not the Night Fury I'm afraid of.\_

\_Then what is it?\_

\_Nothing. I'm not afraid of anything.\_

A natural response, but I do actually have a couple fears as of right now. I just might not admit to them. The most constant and nagging one being the fear of Bonding before I am ready to give it all up, and the most recent one being something that I am not quite ready to admit, not even in my mind.

So that's made up then, I will go. I \_should \_go. I should not still be rooted to the ground with a dumbfounded look on my face while I stare at the Dragon turned away and peering into the lake. But, alas, that's what ends up happening.

Hiccup finally turns around and catches sight of me. At first, his green, Draconic eyes pass over me, as if I were just part of the scenery. But then, they snap back to me in realization that I am, in fact, not part of the scenery.

He jumps, startled. "Astrid- wha- why would you-"

As he sputters, the first thing that happens is that I notice a pretty nasty cut he has nearly dead center of his chin. Blood cakes on it like it had when he had fallen into the cove in the first place, only in a smaller quantity. In actuality, the cut isn't that deep but it must have bled a lot and Hiccup didn't exactly do a decent job of tending to it. He's a Night Fury, though, he'll be fine. After that, I suddenly get angry. Really angry. Shield maiden angry. \_Astrid Hofferson \_angry.

He has no right to be here, in this cove, when \_he's \_the one who flew away. He has no right to be surprised to see me here. He has no right to come back when he originally trusted me enough to stay downed in this place. He might have been the one who crashed down here but \_I'm \_the one who made it our safe haven. Okay, I did not just say that. That sounded completely wrong from what I meant, okay? The point is, he has no right to be here period.

"What are you doing here?" I spit angrily, relaxing my stance and

folding my arms. I am very aware of my axe strapped to my back as of right now. I wouldn't really attack him, he hasn't done anything wrong (yet), but I'm not against giving him a good bruise to the noggin. He could probably use it, Odin, it might even knock some sense into that thick head of his.

"I- what are you- I mean, sorry, I just," he sighed and hung his head, taking a deep breath. "I-I... My tail. Something's wrong with it."

I snort rather ungracefully. Of course \_that's \_the reason he came back. Some part of me feels a little offended and possibly a tad bit hurt but I shake it off with good reason. "Well that's \_your\_ problem."

"Astrid, I-, we, uh...we had a deal," he tells me with phony bravado. But just that reminds me that we do. As much as it pains me to admit it, I did promise that I would help him fly again if he kept my secret. He knows more about my secret than I wanted him to, and I learned more about him than I ever thought I would. And that's not a good thing, I'm just laying that down on the table right now, just so you know.

I sigh and unfold my arms, bringing one to rest on my hip and the other to hang limply. It's a little overly girly for me, but the attitude is what I'm striving for and it feels about right. "Well, I can't really do much if your tail isn't working. Fix it on your own."

"I can't."

He sounds almost just the slightest bit pathetic, but I'm mounted firmly on my high horse and I refuse to come down for anyone. I've never before, why should a \_Dragon \_be any different? Again, he has no right to make me feel bad for him. \_He's\_ the one who left \_me.\_

But now he's here and I'm trying really hard not to freak out.

Remain calm, that's what I'll do. Keep my cool and if I can't do that then I'm sure I can just punch him or something. Always worked before. I most certainly do not cringe slightly when I think that. This is what my plan is, I'm sticking to it. Anger, check. I've got that down. It's so much easier to feel hate than all those pesky feelings that come with its opposing emotion. Not that I would know.

"Then that's not my fault. Maybe you should have stuck around a few more days to make sure it worked before flying off to Odin knows where while I-" I slam my hand over my mouth. Whatever I was going to say it was \_not \_that. Curse my mouth!

"What was that?" Hiccup asks. Thank the gods for his obliviousness.

"Nothing," I say firmly, reddening from embarrassment but I'd lie and say anger. "I have to go."

I spin on my heel so I won't say anything else stupid, but Hiccup

suddenly comes running up to me from behind. Damn, and I thought he was a slow runner...

"Astrid, wait, I didn't mean to-"

But I'm fed up with this and I twist his hand back, effectively knocking him to the ground and calling out in agony.

"Ow- why would you \_do \_that?" he cries, clutching his wrist. So much for the big, bad Night Fury.

"That's for coming back," I growl, ignoring his pain. I grab my axe from my back and hold it over his stomach. "And \_that's,\_" my hand accidentally-on-purpose slips and the axe bounces off his groin, causing him to groan once more, "for \_everything else.\_"

I'm too pissed off to smirk at the critically acclaimed Night Fury moaning on the ground from injuries that I caused, so instead I run off. I hear him crawling to his knees, calling, "Astrid, wait!" but I don't even care enough to obey. What right does he think he has to ask me to wait? As if.

I snort as I run, reaching back to strap my axe once again to my back. I leap up onto the log and jump off...

...only to have someone- and I have a firm inkling on who- grab my arm and I am suddenly not running anymore. I do the only reasonable thing in my situation; I scream. I shamelessly scream my head off and I clutch at that stupid, no good, useless half reptile's hand while he flaps his wings and brings me further and further into the sky- a place where, mind you, Vikings do \_not \_belong. Sure, I'd been flying before but seeing the ground beneath your feet while a Dragon is the only thing keeping you from falling to your ultimate death is definitely not on my bucket list. Or any list, for that matter. Unless it's something among the things I never want to experience again. I think this even surpasses getting hit on by Snotlout and that's saying something.

I scream and scream some more, grabbing blindly at Hiccup's hand, willing him to let go and praying that he doesn't.

"Oh, great Odin's ghost, this is it, ahhhhhhhhhh!" I shriek, not caring if anyone will hear. I don't think they will, anyway. "Thank you for \_nothing\_, you useless half-reptile!"

Hiccup unceremoniously drops me onto the very tip-top of a tree, where luckily I latch onto the branch. Unfortunately, it's about sixty feet into the air and I'm dangling over empty space.

"Hiccup!" I demand. "Get me \_down \_from here!"

"Not until you let me explain," he says from his position on the tree, strangely calm. That smug Dragon is perfectly perched on a branch, looking down at me with his large, green eyes.

"I am \_not \_listening to \_anything \_you have to say!" I spit as I swing onto a more stable part of the branch, closer to the alarmingly thin trunk where I hope it will be stronger.

"Then, then I won't speak," he supplies, glancing back and forth.

"Just let me show you."

He holds a hand out. Seriously? Even if I would take it he's balanced \_on top of a freaking tree! \_I decide right then and there that I hate him. Not just hate, but with a fiery, burning passion. No joke, Night Furies are now on the top of my list of things that I hate. There are those lists again...maybe I should actually make a few, they'd sure come in handy. Getting off topic, back to hating the Night Fury that is Hiccup.

"Please, Astrid," he's practically begging now. Although the bloody slice on his chin is rather off-putting for his intended effect.

I narrow my eyes and glance down at how long of a drop it would be. It's too far and I know it, but there's nothing wrong with hope, right? I blow my bangs out of my eyes which are slightly sticky with sweat. It's drying now, much to my disgust, in the wind up here.

"It's trust me or fall," Hiccup says, sarcastically. He has me trapped (literally on top of a tree!).

"Well, when you put it that way," I say, letting go with one hand. He lurches forward with his eyes alarmed, but when he sees that I'm not really serious, his eyes narrow as well. Just slightly.

"Astrid, seriously. Let me explain."

"I thought we've been over this," I hiss, heaving myself up with a grunt so that I'm balancing on my arms instead of hanging from them.

I hate Night Furies.

"Fine. Just come on. Please? Just let me get you down and explain," he holds his one hand out again, this time pleading with everything he has.

Really, very, extra sure that I do.

"Top of my to-do list," I tell him both sarcastically and ironically. "I could always fall," I pull my legs over so that I'm crouching on the branch. I start to slowly make my way over to him. The corners of his mouth turn up ever so slightly.

Really, really, really hate them. So much.

"This is true," he grins, leaning over so I can climb onto his back which I refuse to think about, ever. Again with the whole 'awkward situation that's only awkward if we make it awkward'. Only, I was trying to make it as extremely awkward as possible. Serves him right. I feel a little satisfied when his cheeks turn red.

"Whatever," I say dryly. "Now get me down."

"On it," he replies, stretching his wings out.

I sigh, really not happy with this whole situation. Well of course I have no choice! When you kidnap someone and force them to submit while dangling sixty feet in the air, that's a little

inevitable.

Nothing can amount the same to how much I hate Night Furies.

"Just so you know," he reddens from either embarrassment or frustration, I'm not quite sure, but his voice is rather cheeky so I'm going to go with the latter. "If you did fall, I'd catch you. Promised I would, didn't I?"

Did I mention that I hate Night Furies?

"\_Ow\_!" Hiccup shouts, his flight faltering just slightly as you can imagine what happened.

\* \* \*

><p>"You wanted to talk so talk."<p>

Hiccup lets me jump off and I stand in front of him at a noticeable distance, folding my arms and raising my eyebrows in annoyance. He looks a little uncomfortable, like I might try to flee at any given moment. I will deny this, but I actually want to hear what he has to say. Besides, I told him I would and I'm not going to back down on my promise...like I was prepared to do with his tail.

"Okay, so, um, here's the thing..." Hiccup starts.

"So, start when you left," I cut in. The words sting but I pretend they don't, and I'm a very good actor. Hiccup isn't, and he cringes slightly. Wisely, though, he doesn't comment on it.

"Alright," he clears his throat awkwardly, "when I, uh, flew off, I went back to the Dragon Queen-

"You mean your mom?"

"Ah, yes, my...mom, anyways, I flew back to the other Dragons-

"The Dragon nest?"

"Are you going to keep interrupting me?" he demands. At my pointed glare, he backs off and mutters an apology. In all honesty, that makes me feel pretty good. I just made the Night Fury back off with a glare! Granted, I think he forgets that he can easily overpower me or anyone else if he so desired, but still. I count it. "But, when I flew back to my mom, I wanted some answers. You see, before, when I was just a hatchling, she didn't use to be the Dragon Queen."

"So...she became the new Dragon Queen when the old one died?"

"That's the thing. I don't think there was another Dragon Queen before my mom. I don't know how or why, but she changed. I stayed because she's my mom, but I never stole anything from the village-

"Berk."

He glares at me, but keeps talking nonetheless. "Yes, \_Berk\_, but I

never stole food, I just helped out with the Dragon raids."

\_'This thing never steals food, never shows itself, and-'\_

"Okay. Now, continue."

\_'-never misses.'\_

Which is true. Hiccup has never missed. Not really. Even when he blasted at me, the only reason I'm still standing is because he wasn't aiming for me directly.

"So, knowing that, I wanted to understand more. So I went back. My mom nearly ripped my throat out, too. Gave me a scar right here with her wings, want to see?" Hiccup juts his chin out to me, where the dried bloody cut is. So that's what happened.

"Yeah, I see," I say, unimpressed. Now that I can see it at a close enough distance, it's pretty small, a thin and even cut barely an inch long. It would look much better if he just wiped the blood off.

"Anyway, that's what saved me, in the end. When she saw that she hurt me, something...strange happened. If you were there I'm sure you would have felt it." I try not to feel anything when he says 'if you were there', because obviously I wasn't and there wasn't any way for me to be. Sort of hard when he just takes off like that. Ahem. Back on track. "The entire atmosphere changed, it was like my mom just...disappeared."

I have to admit, that is a little strange.

"But, I mean, no, not my mom, the Dragon Queen went away. I didn't have the urge to help her with whatever she wanted, I only saw my mom. And the weirdest thing happened- her eyes. They changed. Remember her slits?" Dumb question, how could I ever forget? "They actually dilated, like a normal Dragon's would depending on their emotion. She called me 'Hiccup', not 'Night Fury'. It had to mean something, so when I intended to fly away, I didn't. She walked up to me with her eyes fully rounded. She looked a little horrified about the cut that was on my chin. Which is weird because, the Dragon Queen's never done anything to show that she cares about my wellbeing."

"Where are you headed with this?"

"Right. Um, my mom kind of looked around and... She looked a little scared. Her eyes started to dilate big and thin all at once, and she also seemed really confused. She yelled at me to get away when I tried to help. Slowly, the feeling of the Dragon Queen started to come back. Like she had just left a room and suddenly she was back. Astrid...I think my mom's not really the Dragon Queen."

"How does that work?" I'm still really confused on the matter. I've seen his mom, and quite frankly, she was terrifying. Not really a Dragon I want to encounter again.

"Well... Okay, her Ancestral Dragon is a Stormcutter, not a Dragon Queen. There are only a few that can be classified as that, and a Stormcutter isn't one of them. My theory is that

something's...happened to her, to make her Dragon the Dragon Queen."

"How would that work? Wouldn't that mean she'd have to...Bond with...two...different Ancestral Dragons?"

"Yes. Which is impossible. A person can't Bond with two Ancestral Dragons. It just doesn't make sense. And even if they could, it still isn't possible because Dragon Queens and Alphas just don't exist anymore."

I've heard him use that term before; Alpha. I wonder what it means, so I ask him about it.

"An Alpha? Umm...it's...kind of hard to explain. They're just...superior. No way else to put it. I've never met one, so I don't really know much about them. My mom hadn't either. I guess they have...power over all Dragons. Only, they don't abuse it."

'Like my mom does' is what comes from his mouth next, but he doesn't say anything.

"Okay, let me ask you a question; are the Dragons raiding Berk because their Dragon Queen demands them to?"

"Yes," Hiccup answers.

"But that doesn't make sense," I throw my hands up and spin on my heel, pacing around for a moment before stopping back where I started. "The Dragon raids have been going on for \_years, \_longer than I've been alive. How is that possible?"

"I-I don't know. Mom and I were more of the solo Dragons. Our species aren't very sociable, anyhow. Both are rare and well adapted to being alone."

"True, true...Wait...how do you know all that? Do Dragons learn about their past, too?"

"I \_think \_so," he says, dragging out the word 'think'.

"You 'think so'?" I raise one eyebrow at this. He's really not making any sense.

"Well, my mom taught me all about it. I know about the Ancestral Dragons and such."

"But how? By all definition, you shouldn't."

"No, like I said, my mom taught me. But if she knows, what else could she know?"

"I don't know. Is it possible she was from the village?"

"No," he immediately denies. "My mom's wildborne, just like me."

"Wildborne is a Viking's term for a Dragon-"

"Whose Bonded from birth, I know."



"How do you even know what Bonding is? Shouldn't you just, I don't know, realize that more Dragons keep popping up? When Vikings Bond, they lose recollection of who they are. They don't remember anything, which is why, most of the time, they're banished all together from their loved ones and their tribe."

"I don't know. But look, my mom's not a Viking, she's a Dragon. She might be a terrible one at that, but I know her. She hates Vikings. She always warned me to stay away."

"Look how well that turned out," I remark. Hiccup turns red, although I'm not quite sure why.

"Right," he mumbles, before speaking up again, "either way, she probably heard it from someone else, okay? I'm here and I'm not mindless, there must be others like us."

"Yeah," I agree, thinking back to that Nadder from the ring. I wonder if he's alright. Strange that I care, Nadders still send a shiver down my spine. They just don't frighten me. And it's not concern, merely...fascination. Yes, let's go with that. I'm fascinated. But can you blame me? I mean, he did say my name. Albeit, it was rather difficult for him to do so, but he knew my name. And he knew how to talk. That surely meant some hope for Dragons, didn't it? And no, Hiccup is not enough proof. He's just special... Totally did not just think that.

Although, I'm not too sure I believe Hiccup when he says his mother's wildborne. But I'm not too sure of anything.

"Hey Hiccup?" I say.

"Yes, Astrid?" It's a little strange for him to use my name, but then again, it's strange for his name to be in my mouth, so I discard all weird-ness happily.

"Thanks for letting me know. And I'll- I'll fix your tail."

"Really?" he brightens up, immediately happy.

"Don't look so surprised," I snap, "but I'll have to take a look at it, and I'll need my tools-"

"That's okay, you can just take it back with you," he waves his hand. I blink in surprise. I can't believe he trusts me enough to just let take it. What if he needed to get away? What if he needed to fly for any reason? He wouldn't be able to. I don't know if I could do that.

"Are you- are you sure?" I stammer again.

Now he looks surprised. At my hesitation. I swear, this Night Fury is so confusing!

"Of course," he says.

"But- what if you needed to get away? It'll take a few days I'm sure, plus I might not have time and delay things even further and, and, I

don't know, you have to fly sometimes-

"Astrid," he cuts me off. "Don't blabber, you're not very good at it."

I huff and blow my bangs out of my eyes. It's not my fault I prefer not to talk. But that doesn't mean that I can't. Said Night Fury needs to gain a little respect, that's what I think.

"The problem's here," he says surely, whipping his tail around to point to a general area. "I-I think," he adds.

"Alright. So what's the issue? And wait, didn't you fly just fine just like, an hour ago?" I question. "And how'd you get here if your tail isn't working?"

"It works sometimes," he defends. "But there's something that prevents me from getting a good takeoff and descent. I don't know mechanics, you're the Viking. It just didn't have me flying right plus it gave me an excuse-"

Hiccup snaps his mouth closed and flushes, but I'm too busy examining to really notice or care. Again, two things I'm not too worried about.

Hiccup's tail seems fine. It's still the brown leather material, although fringed around the edges a little from use. The leather strips and metal run up his tail and down his leg in a very complicated-looking manner, bending at the knee so he can still walk with it. He might be a little stiff legged but it's better than half a tailfin. The prosthetic is attached from his tail to his leg around his waist with a metal and leather belt- of the sort- covered by the green tunic I gave him that he's still wearing. The metal and leather on his leg is something else, though. A series of interwoven parts and pieces come together on the side of his leg about mid-calf, with little switches, dials, and buttons to change the gears. Looking back on it, I'm quite proud of my handiwork. Definitely my best invention by far. You know, one of two that actually work(ed).

I can't see anything wrong. Maybe the metal's rusted from being so high in the air, or from friction caused by shifting the gears. Either way, I'll figure it out and have it back to Hiccup as soon as I can. I have a reputation and a promise to uphold, and he has a world to get back to. We just don't belong in the same one. At least, not anymore. Maybe not ever.

The thought almost makes me sad. The only friend I thought I had and it's a Dragon. Not only a Dragon, but a Night Fury. And I have already decided that I hate Night Furies.

I sigh and take the tail fin off, folding the metals in places so that it's easier to transport. The actual tailfin is about as tall as my knees from the ground, and is only fairly heavy. If I weren't so in shape I'd struggle under the weight.

Hiccup watches with interest as I gather everything up in my arms. I suddenly realize that I must have dropped my axe when Hiccup snatched me. Which means I get to go out and search for it. Great. I hope you can catch the sarcasm in that.

I don't say anything to Hiccup when I turn to go. I'm still convincing myself that I'm mad, but I feel like I don't have a valid reason anymore, even though, logically, I have every reason to hate him.

Before I leave, I turn around and punch Hiccup on the arm. Hard.

"Ow!" he protests, clutching the place that's probably not going to bruise simply because he's a Dragon.

"That's for kidnapping me," I say sincerely, a hint of annoyance in my face. Hiccup shrugs, as if to say, 'yeah, I guess I deserve that one.' Which he does, he so does.

I blush as a thought suddenly comes to mind.

\_But Astrid! By all logic, you have every reason to be mad here! Don't you even think about it-\_

Well, like I said. I'm not one for logics. Most of the time I just act and that's exactly what I do when I grab Hiccup's shoulder and plant a chaste kiss on his cheek. I'm thankful for the cover of night that hides my blush. Although, who really cares? Hiccup's too flustered to notice anyway. I almost smirk at his face, but I'm a little busy having an internal argument- ha! more like war- with myself for my actions.

Perhaps I should be a bit more logical. This whole acting-as-I-go-not-as-I-think thing isn't working too well for me. Besides, I don't think of Hiccup like \_that\_. \_He's my friend, not to mention a Dragon...

Okay, but I have seen him shirtless, and I may have thought that-

Gah! Someone club me on the head with an axe, please.

But why? I mean, he is my friend, and it's not like we're all that young-

So, any time for that axe would be good, thanks.

"That's for...everything else," I practically whisper. I grab a better hold on his tailfin and turn to leave at a very brisk pace.

I am not expecting Hiccup to move from that spot for the next twenty-four hours, and I am not expecting him to even say anything. Imagine my surprise when suddenly, something explodes softly right behind my heels.

I turn my head slightly, more glaring with my eyes. Did he really just shoot at me? Well, not at me. Right behind me, where he knew I wouldn't be hit because Night Furies never miss. Hiccup is slightly smirking, but I can still detect a certain pinkish tint to his cheeks.

"What was that for?" I demand dangerously calm. I'm trying and almost succeeding at erasing the last minute from my life entirely.

He shrugs. Useless half-reptile. "Making me do things the hard way."

I roll my eyes at that. He better be sure that I will never give in easily. Would- not will. There will be no next time, I'm sure. Besides, I'd like to forget this night, really, a whole awful lot. Not the parts he told me about the Dragon Queen, but the part about me ki-

In the blink of an eye, actually, no, not even that, Hiccup comes running up to me and grasps both my shoulders. Something warm presses against my mouth- no, not quite right, more like my lips. But wait, what's the difference? Why is there even a difference in the first place?- but it's only there for a second.

I blink in surprise as the realization slowly dawns on me that a Dragon just kissed me. Fine, that's not quite how I think it in my head. It's not really the fact that a Dragon just kissed me (on the lips!), what it's really about is that it was Hiccup.

"W-what was that for?" I ask, attempting to sound angry but only managing dazed.

Hiccup looks a little dazed himself, like he can't believe he just did that either. I suppose he probably can't. Now I'm sure he'll stay rooted to that spot for the next twenty four hours. Hel, I give him a week.

"M-making me do things the hard way," he mumbles through his widened gaze that is staring at me but not really looking at me. It takes a moment to comprehend that he's just answered my question, but when I do, I blush an even deeper shade of crimson.

I try to say something, but I just end up making an embarrassing sound that resembles a squeak but that I refuse to accept as that kind of noise ever permitting from my mouth. So instead, I turn and stumble away before I do anything else to scar my memory for life. I absolutely refuse to admit that I perhaps-maybe squeaked. Astrid Hofferson does not squeak. Especially because Hiccup whatever-his-last-name-is-if-Dragons-even-have-surnames kissed her. (Speaking in third person, no reason in particular.)

Once I leave the cove and am a few steps away I trip and gracefully face plant, luckily causing no damage the tailfin. Sure, I do know what just happened, and I realized it after a few seconds, but now... The actual realization hits me like a club to the face (which I'd still very much appreciate). I rest on my hands and knees for a moment, just catching my breath.

Because holy freaking munge bucket Hiccup just kissed me.

Okay, new fear. This one I will admit in my mind because it is a perfectly rational fear... Yeah, no. Not really. I will never, ever, ever in a million years admit it- I will never admit that I can't find it in myself to mind all that much.

I suddenly shake my head, clearing my mind and slapping myself just for good measure. It actually really hurts and I'm suddenly feeling very stupid for actually doing that. But it snaps me out of my daze and I pick myself and the tailfin up, lumbering my way back to the

village.

That night, I don't do anything. I simply shove the tailfin under my bed, alongside the Dragon Manual. I don't worry about the dinner I've long-since missed and I don't even care if Gobber sees me as I walk like a living corpse to my room. I don't have a ridiculous smile plastered to my face like some of the older Viking girls told about when they had their first kiss (bet it wasn't with a Dragon though). I'm just me. I'm just totally dazed. Completely out of my mind. I simply lay down on my bed, not even bothering with the blankets. The tail will wait. I'll still work on it. But, just for the record, I still really hate Night Furies.

...

Shut up.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Whew! Longest chapter yet, guys, 6K words! I am determined to get back to answering reviews so if you want to actually talk to me (and if you're not a guest) then be sure to review! Or not, then just disregard the PM or whatever floats your boat...or however they say that. Oh, everybody except for Rumbling Night Cutter. You're the exception simply because you called me an arsenic sulfur (;P)...and not because we're already in a conversation...<strong>

\*\*Anyways, I'm actually really happy with how this turned out, and would love some feedback so let me know what you think through anything! Follows, reviews, PMs, whatever. Thanks for sticking with my once-a-week updates and see you next Wednesday!\*\*

#### 14. How To Find A Battle Ax

So I suppose you're expecting this to be the part where I suddenly and inexplicably don't want to be a Viking anymore, finally come to terms with my inner Dragon, and fly off with Hiccup into the sunset.

Well, I have news. That's not going to happen. Besides, Berk doesn't have very good sunsets. Not that that would ever be an option!

So, completely erase that image out of your mind. Instead, let me replace it with what really goes on.

Berk is quite the mysterious place. Most of the time, the rain and cloudy weather would be enough to make anyone sail right on by. Not us, obviously, but still. The point is, our town isn't known for its sunny weather. But the mornings are rather gorgeous. A quite conflicting island if you ask me, which no one ever does. Not that I mind, I don't like talking much anyways.

I'm kind of in a conflict. See, I have a second trial for the final exam. I'm supposed to win. I'm going to win. However, I also have a friend who happens to be, you guessed it, a Dragon. A Night Fury, actually. Who I'm helping fly again. Who I shot down in the first place and didn't kill, like I was supposed to. I was supposed to do a

lot of things that I didn't do, which is why I'm worried for today. I have every intention to win, just like I had every intention to kill that Night Fury, like I had every intention to never see Hiccup again and call it good. So do you see why I'm a little worried now? No? Well, you will.

"Ready for the big day?" Gobber asks me when I walk into the forge.

"You bet," I answer half truthfully. It's believable, though, so I go with it. In a way, I kind of am. I know I can win, but if I will is a whole different concept. I almost wish I could simply skip this day. If only that were possible. Crossing certain bridges later sounds like a great idea right now, but unfortunately, the quote stands firm, sooner rather than later.

"Sorry, what?" he pulls his iron mask off, grunting and wiping a layer of sweat off his forehead. He then hobbles over to me. I repeat my oh-so-descriptive answer and he chuckles. "Don't worry, you'll do fine."

"I know."

It may sound rude, but Gobber laughs it off, all too used to my attitude. To him, this is me being confident, not cocky.

"Alright," he places a hand nearly as large as my head on my shoulder, patting me a couple times. I try not to wince. I may be tough but that doesn't mean it still doesn't hurt when someone triple your size gives you a hearty slap on the shoulder. Especially when they don't really understand their strength.

I sigh and lean against one of the pillars. Gobber pauses to stop and glance up from douching the hot iron in a barrel of fresh Berkian salt water. "That sounded like the weight of the world. You sure you're alright, lass?"

"Well...no. No, I'm not. I'm so confused and...you're not even listening." I sigh again when Gobber has his iron mask back on and is banging away on a sword. He can't hear a word I'm saying, I know from personal experience. Hey, he's not listening.

There's no point, right? I mean, he can't hear me, it's stupid anyway. But, then again, it always felt nice talking to Hiccup. But Gobber's not Hiccup, and I need to fix Hiccup's tail so he can get the heck away from me again. So, there's really no point.

"You see, it all started a couple months ago. I'm a Dragon. I know, don't tell anyone, I know I could get killed. But the thing is, I haven't Bonded yet, I'm still here, I'm still me. So, I don't know. And then, there's the Night Fury. He saw. It really began when I shot him down..."

And just like that, I'm suddenly spilling everything to Gobber's fallacious ears. I tell him about why I couldn't kill the Night Fury I had shot down. How it had just looked so human that it didn't feel right to kill it, how it turned out to become Hiccup, who further turned out to be my friend, and pausing to comment just how crazy that is. Which, it really is. I tell him about the Dragon Queen, how she's Hiccup's mother, how she rules a monarchy over the

Dragons and that's why they raid us. But also the confusion because Dragons have raided us forever and his mom's only been the Dragon Queen for a few years.

(I don't tell him how much it hurt when Hiccup left me with no goodbye, or the conflicted and foreign emotions I received when he kissed me- actually, omitting the kiss altogether.)

"And now, I have no idea what to do," I sigh and sit down, pressing my head into my hands. I shake my head slightly. Something about saying everything out loud has this crushing effect, as if I'm finally realizing what it is I'd doing all alone. But 'alone' is my specialty. Always has been, whether I mean to or not. I'm stuck in a position and I can't even fully convince myself that I want out. Don't get me wrong, I definitely do, but I'm not one hundred percent sure...

And now I'm confusing myself.

"Gobber, what do I do?" I ask quietly.

I hear a sword cling and I jump up.

"Oh, Astrid, you're still here?" Gobber exclaims.

"Uh huh," I reply stiffly.

"Well, best be getting along," he suggests, practically shoving me out the door with a battered but "trusty" sword. I told him that I had misplaced my axe (well, I haven't exactly had any time to go scour the forest for one particular fallen tree with a battle axe. Yeah, great idea.), and he seems to believe it well enough. His face is becoming a little unreadable lately, and I don't necessarily like it. I've always been able to tell what's going on in that meat head of his.

"Alright," I nod and turn away. I don't like not being able to read him. Gobber's raised me as his own, despite what most people think, he's a large father figure in my life and I do have a large quantity of fondness for the one handed, one legged Viking.

I really need to work on Hiccup's tail. I should have it done by tomorrow, if I want to get rid of everything. If everything goes to plans, my final exam will be tomorrow and I don't want Hiccup anywhere in a thirty mile radius within Berk. He'd probably effect my thoughts and I'd get trapped between a Nightmare's claws. Is it sad that I can actually see that?

I swiftly swing the sword back and forth, flipping it up and down and testing the balance. It is a nice sword, but it's not my axe. Nothing is. That was my mother's axe and it does hold some sentimental value. Which is rather stupid, if you think about it, forming a bond with a weapon. They can be destroyed or needing replaced at any given moment, and if you're attached then you have a problem. Sort of like I have now, but I'm a Viking so I'll just push it to the back of my mind and forget about it.

Except for the fact that I'm not really a Viking. A traitor to my people. Betrayed my whole clan by helping a Dragon. I cannot do this, what am I thinking?

The ring isn't filled to the brim. Nobody really cares about final Training, they only care about final exams. That's the fun part, where Dragon blood and guts (or Viking, however it goes, hey, it's happened before) get spilled on the arena floor, to become another of thousands of blood stains before them. Either way, a true fight would break out and, well, you'd be crazy to not want to see it. Originally, I would want to watch, maybe learn a few things. Now I'm caught between throwing the test so I won't have to kill a Dragon because it reminds me of Hiccup, and itching to be in the ring facing the Monstrous Nightmare's golden eyes and reminding me of myself. Completely helpless for the fate laid out before them. The only thing it can do is delay the inevitable.

\_You and me, both, \_I think. I'm torn between who has it worse. I know you'd like to think it's the Dragon, but I'm the one who has to slay it. That is, of course, if I win in the first place. Which I intend to do, but lately, what I intend and what actually happens are two very separate ordeals.

I need to win this, though. I have to prove that I \_am \_a Viking and that I have every right to be in this tribe. It's my destiny, what I need to do, what hundreds of Hoffersons before me have done. I will not be the one to break tradition, that's a promise. This is something that's important to me and I will not let a Dragon stand in my way. Not now, not ever.

How many times have I said that before and completely gone against every word? More than I'd care to admit, that's for sure.

"Everyone, in the ring, please," Gobber calls. I'm a bit confused on how he got here before me but, it's Gobber. He often has mysterious ways. "Today's your final day of Training before Elder Gothi decides who gets the honor if killing their first Dragon in front of the entire village."

\_Yes, great honor, \_I think sarcastically. \_Wait, what am I thinking? I'm going to be the one to win.\_

In a blur, we're all hiding in separate areas of the arena, behind the wooden barriers. I have the Dragon nip safely fastened to my side, so I wait to hear the steady buzz of a Gronkle. I'm glad it's not the Zipplebacks again. Those two confuse the living daylights out of me. They are severely intelligent, yet bluntly dumb and frustratingly loyal. Plus, there's the whole pairs thing that my mind still can't wrap around. The Gronkle is slow with limited shots, an easy target, so long as you stay away from its tail and lava blasts.

I hear a thudding. The Dragon's near. I quickly lay the sword down so I won't scrape it against the floor, peeking out for half a second before jerking my head back. The Gronkle's just a few yards away. Sooner or later. Now or never.

Sooner.

Now.

With a fearsome battle cry, I leap out behind my barrier and charge the stunned Gronkle full on, sword raised high and mighty and eyes



crazed with determination. It does the trick, and before I know it, I'm too close, too fast, to stop.

\_What am I doing?\_

I effectively jump to the Gronkle's head, using the butt of the sword to knock the heavy, boulder class Dragon out. It seems like everything passes in the blink of an eye. That could not have just happened. It was much too quick. I need more preparation, more knowledge for what's to come. I'm not ready to be...ready, just like that. I need more, more, more.

It isn't hard for Elder Gothi to make the decision. Once Gobber rests his palm flat just a few inches above my head, she nods and points vaguely. I cringe, but I act twice as proud as I am. I'm not going to lie, I am a little happy that I am getting this chance. Dreams since birth don't change so easily, and I'm fine with that. This is what I should want, this is where I belong. It makes sense for me to be here. I have this opportunity in front of me and I'd be a fool to waste it. I already am a fool for jeopardizing it.

And so, my final exam is tomorrow, and I am convincing myself that this is right, this is how everything should be, this is what makes sense.

The problem is, though, I've never been so good at listening to logic.

\* \* \*

><p>Sometimes, you meet people and you have no hindsight of how much of a big deal they are going to become in your life. Like my uncle Finn who took me in, only to be the first to show me that Dragons truly are the beasts everyone claims them to be. Or Gobber, who I met as a child and never imagined that I'd grow up with him... Or Hiccup, the Night Fury I was supposed to kill but instead defied all laws of nature by befriending and almost-not-quite-not-really-sure-not-willing-to-think-about-it liking him.<p>

Well, back to my point, some people just show up in your life, and you have no idea the impact they are going to cause. And sometimes, they come at the worst of times. But what else can you expect? The gods have been ever so kind to give me this life of luxury, what's one more outrageous plot twist?

Like I said, not one for logic very much, but the gods' definition of it sucks.

"Oh the gods hate me," I announce, mid afternoon in the woods approximately in the area I "lost" my battle ax. It's not even counted as lost, and I don't even know why I'm out here. Can't I get a new battle ax? A better one? Is there a particular reason as to why I want this individual one back? I know there is, I'm just having a hard time believing it. I've mentioned it before, and I'm going to point it out again, getting attached to things are dangerous in the Viking world.

Sadly, with the weather as bad as it is, there are quite a few overgrown, fallen trees in any given forest, and I wouldn't even be

able to find them all if you gave me a week. I groan and slap a branch of leaves out of my face. The sword Gobber had given me is strapped to my back in place of my ax, but it doesn't feel the same. The balance is off and I can't seem to find a comfortable place to grip it. However, it's better than nothing. But just to be on the precarious side, I have my dagger tucked into my boot. I'm starting to regret it as the wool lining only does so much for something that digs into the side of your ankle every time you take a step.

I breathe out, feeling very cheated in life. I haven't done anything wrong, have I? I've always made sure to be the image of perfection, Astrid Hofferson, and I am not willing to let that change. I have to be perfect, it's the only way I'll be able to make it in life. Call me a perfectionist (because I am), but I'm a Viking. We like things the way we like them.

I kick at a stone on the forest floor, scratching at my arm wrappings. I haven't checked them in a while, and to be frank, I don't really want to. I might not like what I find.

"How could this happen to me?" I ask aloud. Nobody's here to listen let alone care. It really isn't fair, I decide. I didn't do anything particularly bad in this world, did I? Maybe hurting people was enough. But I'm a Viking, I hurt people.

I didn't know someone was following me.

My senses tingle, which is really the only way to put it. It's the feeling where you know someone is watching you. Normally, I'm more alert and I can stay attune to these things, but I was too busy playing feeling sorry for myself. This is what I get for throwing pity parties; someone successfully stalking me. Ha, that's a quote for Vikings to live by. We don't throw pity parties, anyways. We just attack stuff. Which is quite sad, if you really think about it, but all the same true.

I wait, counting to twenty. With still nothing, the wind starts to pick up, blowing through the branches and whistling through the leaves. A few birds are chirping somewhere in the distance, but they're not what I want to hear. There's no sign of anyone watching me. Just the woods. But I'm never wrong with these things. There's someone- something- watching me.

I slowly turn in circles as I walk, easing out my sword out from its sheath on my back. It feels unnaturally wrong. The balance is off and I don't like it one bit. Take what I can get, though. It's better than the dagger in my boot.

A branch snaps, echoing everywhere, making it impossible for me to hear its origin. "Come on," I mutter to myself, swinging the sword behind me instinctively. Who could be following me? Or maybe the question isn't who, maybe's it's what. The first time I ran into the Night Fury (because he wasn't quite Hiccup then) comes to mind, and I automatically look up. Bad idea.

I don't see who(what)'s there, but my suspicions are confirmed, as a flurry of leaves fall to the ground, the wind snapping them all around me. I'm sure nothing of the sort actually happens, but it feels like I'm in the center of a whirlwind- or maybe a water spout of leaves- and there is no calm eye. I can't see anything as I lash

out blindly. I know that it's a bad option, but if I'm being attacked I have to at least try. Just because I can't see doesn't mean that I will give up. I won't ever give up.

I feel something solid on the end of sword the next time I lash out, but nothing makes a sound. I retract my sword back to my shoulder, praying that what I hit is my attacker.

Seemingly as quickly as it all began, the leaves die down, being taken away with the wind. The ones that already fell to the ground blow gently across the forest floor, but there's no sign of my attacker. Or anyone, for that matter. Strange, I could have sworn that there was-

I slowly turn around and give out a yell, jumping back a few feet.

As I turn, in an extremely close proximity is a Dragon. And it's not an oh-so-hated Night Fury (I did say shut up, did I not?). But what's more alarming is that he has a weapon. And not just any weapon, my weapon. Yes, my ax. How did it even get it?

I quickly take note of my surrounding and assess the situation. The Dragon doesn't appear threatening, his eyes are largely dilated and he's just staring at me. He's large in size, but not all that round as being a Dragon probably isn't all that food beneficial. Especially if he's under influence of the Queen. Definitely male, though. The fact that he's a Deadly Nadder doesn't hit me until a few moments later, but when it does, I'm surprised to find that there's just...nothing. No fear, no hatred, no anything. He's just another species of Dragon. I'm a bit conflicted on how I feel about that. True, I don't have my irrational fear of them, but could the fact that I'm a Deadly Nadder be affecting my views?

The Dragon cocks its head at me, still clutching the ax. I cautiously observe him, as I don't really care whether or not he actually knows how to use my ax, it's just that he has one. His wings are giant by all definition, by far one of the largest I've seen on a Nadder. His horns are faded and worn from weathering, but his purple scales are bright enough, meaning that he can't be too old. I'd say maybe mid to late twenties. He has this awful, scraggly beard that flays out in a giant pale blonde rats' nest. His golden eyes continue to stare at me, and he cocks his head the other way. I find myself distracted with his wings. They have a peculiar pattern of circles and other polygonal figures that are tinged with red, off white, and yellow. Those large wings, those purple scales...

"Wait a minute," I exclaim, making us both jump. I continue nonetheless. "...I...I know you!"

Granted, there are a lot of purple-scaled Nadders out there. They may come in a range of colors, but there's still a good limit. However, this Nadder is achingly familiar, and I'm almost afraid I know exactly where.

"You- you're the Nadder from the ring," I say shakily. He doesn't confirm or shoot me down, and I'm left to wonder if he can even understand what I'm saying. I know he talked, but maybe he just picked up those words. The Dragon Manual states that these Sharp Class Dragons are very intelligent. Who knows, maybe Hiccup and the

Queen really are the only ones who can understand and speak to us.

I lower my sword just slightly, squaring my shoulders. "W-why do you have my axe?"

His eyes suddenly spark, making me flinch back, but he only gives me a confused look. I try to interpret what his eyes are saying, and I think he's confused on what I'm asking him.

"Ax," I say, pointedly and slowly. I point to the weapon- \_my \_weapon!- clutched in his hands. "Mine. Why do you have it?"

Okay, I know he can, he said something in the ring, but it's still quite a shock when he speaks out, stuttering, "A-a-ax."

He seems to choke it out, like it hurts to come from his throat. I can't help but feel a twinge of sympathy for him.

\_This could be me, \_I think.

I try to recall everything that had worked with Hiccup, but Hiccup hadn't had a weapon. So, I'm out of luck. Well, looks like I'm roughing it.

"Why did you follow me?" I ask clearly, speaking extra slow. He blinks at me.

"A-A-As-t-tr-trid's a-ax," he stumbles, looking quite proud when he gets it out.

Now it's my turn to blink at him.

He said my name again. I don't know why it's such a flattering perception, but it shouldn't be. So what if he knows my name? I should be focusing on more important things.

He said, 'Astrid's ax' (more or less), so he knows it's mine. What does that mean for me? How did he know it was mine and how did he find it?

I slowly nod. "Uh huh."

He looks down at my ax pointedly, then looking back at me, he slowly stretches his arms out. I nearly choke. Does that mean...does that mean that he's been following me to give my ax back? But...Dragons don't think that way! My mind is put into overdrive and I try my hardest not to shut down completely.

He nods his head, saying 'go on, take it' through his eyes. Dazedly, I take a few cautious steps forward. I slowly reach my hand out, not wanting to startle either of us.

He remains calm, though, which is more than I can say for me. I open my hand to grasp the handle and imitate Hiccup as I snatch it away in the blink of an eye. He flinches but doesn't move. I don't know why, but I instantly let out a breathe when I have my battle ax. I know that that means that he is no longer armed and I am (even though he's a Dragon for Thor's sake), but still. Alright, now to question him a little more. He might not get it too much but I can at least try, right?

"So...why are you following me?" I ask, because he had to be following me before to know where my ax fell and that I even lost it in the first place (no thanks to one particular offspring of lightning and death itself).

He tilts his head, something that I notice he does a lot. It's very...birdlike. By now, I'm figuring that this means he's either confused or assessing the situation, much like I do (minus the tilting head part).

"A-Ast-trid f-f-f-r-ree-eeed, n-no-ow s-a-v-v-ve f-f-fr-fro-om...d-an-g-g-er?"

I translate the stuttering in my head. Those were a lot of new words for him, so it took him a little extra to say. 'Astrid freed, now save from danger' is what I get, and I hope it's correct. Now for what he actually means. I let him escape, so that's the 'Astrid freed' part. 'Now save from danger', did that mean I was saving him or he was saving me? And what danger? Any sort in mind or just in general?

"Um, so...you are...my...protector...now?" I try to ask. Is that what he means?

He appears thoughtful. "P-protector," he shoots out, as if the word were burning his tongue. He then grins toothily. "Protector. Ye-es. A-Astr-id's protector."

I don't fail to notice that the term 'protector' seems to come easily to his mouth, and I wonder if that's just an uncanny coincidence or...I don't know. Ever heard the saying, 'there are no such thing as coincidences'? Yeah.

"Okay," I say, attempting to sort it all out in my mind. "Do..you have a name?"

"N-name?" he tilts his head to the right.

"Oh, um..." I think of the best way to explain it. I then point my hand to myself. "Astrid. That's my \_name.\_ Do you have a name?"

He pauses, then stutters, "A-As-tri-d's protector."

"Well, I can't keep calling you that. You need a real name."

"D-d-d-o n-no-ot ha-v-ve o-o-one."

"Alright, um..." I go through sets of Viking names, but none seem right. They're all, quite frankly, insults, and I don't think he'll appreciate it. My name seems to be the only one that isn't, meaning 'divine beauty'. Most of the Hoffersons tend to have 'divine' in front of their name... Hmm...

"How about Asmund?" I ask. "It means 'divine protection'. It was my grandfather's name, I don't know, it seems to work..."

He stares at me. Too much, Astrid.

"A-A-As-m-mu-und-d," he tests it out in his mouth. Then, he grins an ear-to-ear smile. I take it he likes it? "A-asmund. Asmund. Asmund. Asmund." he chants happily, grinning all the while.

"Okay, then...Asmund," I say. "Well, why don't we find some place for you to- \_AAHHH!\_"

I fall to the ground and scream because there is \_fire.\_

It's not everywhere, and I can't see it, but it has to be there because my arms are absolutely \_burning. \_I don't like submitting to pesky things like 'pain', but there are certain times where it is permitted. Right now is one of them.

"Son a half troll, munge bucket..." I groan through gritted teeth. I scream as the flames flicker higher. "Oh, great Odin's ghost, \_make it stop!\_"

Where's my ax? I want to chop my own arms off. End the pain now. Oh gods, it hurts! I clutch one wrist but it doesn't do anything. My hands clench tightly in a fist, my fingernails biting into the palms of my hands. Nothing.

There's a dagger in my boot. I don't think I can cut my arms off, that loose too much blood. But I need something- anything- to make it stop!

"Ah," I groan, biting back a scream as I reach for the knife in my boot. I grasp at it, but my hands won't obey. What is going on? The only time I've ever felt this much pain before was when...

Oh gods. Oh no, not here, not now! I still have things I need to do! I need to get back to the village, I have to complete my final exam, I have to figure out what the heck I have to do, I have to fix Hiccup's tail so he won't be stuck in that damn cove for the rest of his life.

When did Hiccup become important and- oh! Pain, pain on my arms. It wasn't anywhere else, it was just there, constant, sharp, and agonizing pain. Please, make it stop!

"H-help," I muttered, hating myself for it. Gods, why would I ask for help from a Dragon? Because he had said he was my protector now? I don't need protection, I can handle things on my own. I've never needed protection before. I'm Astrid Hofferson, I can and will do things on my own in my own way. No help or protection needed. If anyone's going to be saving me, it's me.

"Oh, gods," I grunted as I heaved myself to my hands and knees, gasping for breath. I'd never actually been burned by fire, but if I ever did, I imagine it would feel something like this.

I resolve to not cutting myself with the dagger, but I keep it in mind because, to be honest, it still sounds like a pretty good option. Instead, I begin to claw off my bindings. I don't know why, but I feel like I need to check. The pain is so familiar, just intensified. I have to know if what I think is going on is really going on.

Before I can finish, though, it just...stops. The fire, the pain, the

agony, it's gone. I'd say I'm relieved, but I'm too suspicious. What in the name of Odin is going on?

I breathe heavily as I sit up, resting on my knees. I wait for the shock to pass, so I can finally bring myself to unwrap my bindings. I'm worried about what I will find. Will the scales have multiplied? Maybe changed color? I don't know. But I have to find out.

However, nothing could prepare me for what I see there. On my wrists, where I have to wear wrappings to cover my secret, is...

Absolutely nothing.

There's no scales, no blue coloring, nothing vaguely reptilian. In fact, there's no sign at all. What? I'm so confused. I quickly check my other wrist, but it's the same thing. No scales.

"Huh?" I say out loud. Asmund is still here, and he squawks loudly. I look over at him, but it's not Asmund that I see. Gone is the stuttering Dragon who decided to protect me all because I freed him from his prison. In his place is...well, a Dragon.

His pupils are slit, and he shakes out his wings.

"Asmund?" I ask carefully. I look back down at my wrists. Oh no, something came back. On each hand, right on the inside of my wrist directly underneath my palm is a single, deep blue scale. Looks like I'm not done yet.

He looks at me, but it sends shudders down my spine. This is truly an animal of prey.

"S-s-she i-is c-c-c-ca-al-li-ing," he stutters, rather seriously.

If the 'she' is the 'she' I'm thinking of, I don't want anything to do with her. "Please tell me this 'she' isn't the Dragon Queen..."

He nods. I sigh. I just can't get rid of her, no matter what I do. But what does this mean with my scales? I don't even know. I can't say I know anything anymore.

"What's going on?" I ask, picking up my wrappings. Asmund stares.

"Y-y-yo-ou're a-a D-Drag-on," Asmund states, not as a question.

I slowly nod, looking down and flushing.

"S-s-sh-e ca-all-s t-to u-u-us-s."

\_I'm not going, \_is what I think.

"I can't fly," is what I say.

\_You mutton head!\_ I chastise.

"A-A-As-tr-id i-is no-ot g-goi-ing," Asmund says, making me breathe a sigh of relief. "W-w-will f-f-f-ind yo-ou," he promised.

I have two options then. I can stop Asmund and see the Queen again, risking my safety as well as everything I've worked for, or I can stay here while he flies away. And let him protect me from something that I need to know. Well, safety's always been an occupational hazard for us Vikings.

"Asmund, wait!" I shout, just as he's about to take off. He stops, but looks agitated, like he needs to go. Which, knowing the Queen, he probably does. Now or never, Astrid. I take a deep breath. "Take me with you."

Asmund's eyes immediately widened. "N-n-no-o."

"Yes. You said you wanted to protect me. That you owe me a debt, I guess. You can pay it off by taking me with you to the Queen."

"N-n-n-o-o. Q-Q-ueen d-does n-n-n-o-o-t l-like h-h-h-ha-a-alf-fl-flings," he continues to shake his head, but I'm not taking no for an answer. I normally don't.

"Halfling?" I ask. "What's that?"

"Y-y-y-ou."

I stop then. Asmund is definitely a wild born. Not questionable, like Hiccup or the Queen. So halfling was a term used by Dragons for Vikings who are Bonding. Alright, I guess I can deal with that. I call Hiccup a (useless) half-reptile all the time and he calls me a (stupid) half-human.

I lift my chin, reaching back to strap my ax to my back.

"Pay off your debt to me," I demand. "Take me with you."

He sighs. A Dragon is honorable, if anything. I expect to have to fight more, but instead, he scoops me up by my right arm and drapes me across his back. I cling to him as he stretches his wings out.

"H-h-ho-o-ld o-on-n," he stutters, squatting down a bit before running a few steps and leaping into the air. Luckily, I'm a bit used to the feeling of my stomach dropping to my feet and then rushing back up to my throat, but I don't think I'll ever get used to feeling of just being \_free.\_

It's a stupid thing, really, as I have just as many worries up here as I do down here, like falling off, a lot. There's really more to lose, up here. But still. It's a nice feeling of weightlessness. Like almost anything is possible.

But, one can only fly for so long. You have to have a destination. No matter what the mad people say, it isn't about the journey. It is the destination. Everything must come to an end, whether it be happy or not. That's just the way it is. Everything's a war, and no matter how brutal, someone will win. And sometimes, it's simply the last one standing. Everything must come to an end. Asmund and I will reach the Dragon's nest, and I can only pray that I find out what I need before she decides she wants to kill me.



Because like it or not, I'm going back to the Dragon Queen, and there's nothing to blame except my own stupidity. So, nothing out of the ordinary, I guess.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>I am super sorry for missing two weeks! I know it's not Wednesday, and no promises that I'll be able to whip up another one by this Wednesday, but I wanted to get this up. It took me several tries to write it because I kept accidentally deleting all of my progress... But, well, enjoy this extra long chapter just because! Also, I am just now realizing that I have been spelling ax wrong this whole time. I'll go back and fix it sometime.<strong>

\*\*See you when I see you, and if it's not this Wednesday, I'll try to get back on schedule. School starts for me tomorrow so busy again, yay... Wish me luck, guys. Happy belated holidays!\*\*

## 15. How To Learn A Secret

Asmund is not happy about the way things are turning out. I suppose I can't really blame him, I did practically force him to take me along to the possibly most dangerous place for me when he swore to protect me. Hey, the way I see it, he could have refused and re-paid his debt otherwise. But he's a Dragon, he has better things to do. Why put off what you can do today tomorrow, right? So, he could have totally refused.

"A-A-Astri-id, s-s-sh-e-e w-wo-o-on't li-ike y-y-ou- he-e-e-r-re," Asmund muttered frantically, his wings spread wide with me clinging to his large girth. The pain that had come into my arms previously had vanished, as if it had never happened in the first place. I'm still suspicious, but the relief outweighs the thought. I never want to go through that pain again. Ever. I'll just state that plain and clearly.

"Don't worry...Asmund. The Dragon Queen and I go way back," I assure him. I don't even buy it. But I have some things I need to know and there a Viking's gotta do what a Viking's gotta do. I try to tell myself that I'm doing this solely for my tribe, but I can't even convince myself of that. I shudder, but not from the cold weather. Something's changing within the Dragons, and it must have something to do with her.

He cackles out nervously but I ignore him and the churning pit in my stomach. I'm not afraid, I'll say that. I'm not afraid of the Dragon Queen; I'm just afraid of what she might tell me. But like always, I'll just face it head on and be prepared for anything and everything.

I'm not quite sure if time passes differently. According to previous knowledge, time does not differ and passes just the same. But it is said that it can seem to pass slowly or quickly depending on how a person is feeling. I've never believed that before, I mean, time is time, how can it be any different? The same amount will pass in its own time. I suppose I can say that I've lost track of time, but it generally just...passes. Right now, I'm not sure if the time is slow or fast. The thought is a little interesting. How can something so definite and infinite be different? Time is just funny like that, I

suppose. It's the one thing that we all will eventually submit to, if we do not fall to our foes. The one enemy we have no hope to beat. When I put it like that, time is a lot more dangerous. Silent, the enemy creeping up. A different approach than just head on attack. It attaches itself among the ranks and plagues the men, haunting them for the rest of their lives.

Right now, time isn't something I have a whole lot of. I could be running out of time, for all I know. I let go of Asmund's neck with one arm, staring at where my scales had disappeared only a few minutes ago. It should be a relief. I should feel happy, elated, relieved. This has to mean that my Dragon's left, hasn't it? But I just don't know. Call me superstitious, but I can't help but feel like it's not over yet. You know, other than the fact that I could be flying to my potential death right now. The scales always represented my Bond, what I resented with my whole being. I should resent them. So, what's changed? Why aren't I relieved? Why, now that my Dragon has potentially left, do I feel so- what's a good word? Sad? No, I can't say that I'm sad. I'm not happy, either, which confuses me, but I'm not sad. I don't miss it, if that's what you mean. I don't miss it, I don't want it back, and I'm not sad that it's gone. And yet, without it, I'm...

\_Empty,\_ my brain whispers.

How can that be right? I question when I realize that it's true. I feel empty. Like a part of me is missing. How does that work? It was a parasite, a tumor that didn't belong anywhere near me. Why do I feel this way? There's no good reason. I'm a Viking. I should be celebrating my victory over conquering this Dragon. Even if I did come to like it, I had only seen it once. It wasn't me yet, it was just a Deadly Nadder. Now that it's gone, I'm no longer Bonding.

But then the next question is; is it really gone? How do I know that this empty feeling is because it left? It could be, I don't know, anything else but that. Something- let's call it instinct, tells me that it is. At least for the time being. I've always trusted my instincts before, I have no reason to disbelieve them. And that saddens me, and then that scares me. It's just something that I know I shouldn't be feeling, and yet I can't help that I am. I like to think that I have a good hand of control over my emotions, but now, after everything's that happened, I realize that my grasp is not even close to 'control'. I've just never really tapped into them before. I've always needed a one-track mind, focus on only the things I need to and pushing away everything else. That tactic isn't working so well right now.

The Dragon's Nest is what Chief Stoick calls it. What he wouldn't give to find this place. If he asked me if I knew where it was, I'm afraid I don't know my answer. I could lie and say no, which is partially true, as my Dragon instincts had led me here in the first place, and Asmund is taking me now with the fog too thick to see any useful landmarks. And if I said yes, because I know I could find it if I really, really, really wanted to, I'd doom the Dragon Queen- who, like it or not, is Hiccup's mother, Hiccup, Asmund, and myself in the process. The latter may sound like the worse option, but it's my duty to my tribe, my people, to defeat our enemy. Not conspire with it, let alone help it or go to their nest with no intentions of harm. I must really be losing my mind.

"O-ouch." Asmund complains. I realize that I had been clutching his hair really tightly. I immediately let go and send him an apologetic glance. Then, he surprises me by saying, "W-we're h-h-e-e-r-e."

As the giant mountain looms nearer and nearer, I can't help but feel just the tiniest bit frightened. I know I make a big deal out of being unafraid, but I'm fifteen and I've never actually been in a war before. I like to think I'm all mature and prepared for what my life has in store, but in all reality, I'm just a kid with a battle ax. Nothing's ever going to change that, except for when I'm no longer a child with a battle ax and am a Viking with a Dragon problem. More so than now. I don't really know what I'm doing. Actually, I'm probably flying towards my own death, that's what. But there's more to this than what I know, and I have to find out about it. Besides, risking my life is just an occupational hazard of being me, right? Right.

"A-A-s-stri-ri-d," Asmund moans when we land and I climb down, immediately setting off. I do feel kind of bad for making him do something he doesn't want to do, but he owes me a debt, I guess, and I have to make use of what I've got.

"Stay here," I tell him. "Stay out of sight, don't come out in front of her, okay? I'll need you to be my wings home." I make sure he nods in understanding before I turn around and walk away. I have my battle ax out and in position, but oddly enough, there aren't any Dragons around to be seen. Strange, I know the sky was practically littered with Dragons when Asmund and I took off. They have to be somewhere. The mountain is big but it can't hide that many wild Dragons.

There's a rustling somewhere ahead of me that echoes throughout the cave and I freeze, not daring to move. I count to fifteen and observe my surrounding extra carefully before cautiously continuing on. No more out of the usual noises occur after that, and everything is beginning to get extremely suspicious. Step by step, the inside of the mountain gets hotter and hotter as I go along. The light is dim and tinged with red, and there's fog in the pit where Hiccup and I saw all the Dragons dropping food.

I feel a little twist in my gut when I think of Hiccup. I should be working on his tail, not spying on his mom. Not that he would especially care that I'm spying on his mom because she's the Dragon Queen, but, you know...still. I knit my eyebrows together in frustration. No, he does not deserve my pity. He's the one who left, he's the one who should have to wait. He can't just kiss me and expect everything to be fine. Although, I may have... You know what, let's not get into details. I've been solely convinced that I would remain independent since I was like, five, so I've never thought about the kind of drama that would come along with...whatever it is that Hiccup and I have. I'd like to think of it as a friendship, but I sincerely doubt that most friends go around kissing each other. Again with the whole drama part. Not my forte.

It's not really a surprise when I run into the Dragons. Okay, actually, it is quite a surprise, but it shouldn't be. Generally, I'm pretty graceful, but today is just not my day because when I stumble upon the Dragons, I \_literally\_ stumble upon the Dragons.\_

The roars are beyond loud and when they're coming from Odin knows how

many Dragons at once, they're absolutely deafening. I have to stop and drop to the ground just to cover my ears. Luckily, they only last a few seconds, but I swear my I'm bleeding from my ears now. Who knows, maybe I am. I hope not.

"Hello young halfling," a voice speaks clearly behind me and I jump. "What are you doing here?"

I swing around to face my pursuer, running smack dab into a female Gronkle. Her hide has a bluish tint and, like most Gronkles, she is heavily built with small wings protruding from her back and golden eyes slit in an unfriendly manner. Defined muscles stand out on her arms and I would definitely be wary of her if we were in a battle. I keep my eye on her nonetheless, aiming to lower my weapon. It is then I realize that she had talked perfectly.

"Who are you?" I ask boldly.

She cocks her head, her eyes dilating large and small. Her nostrils flare, tasting the air for a threat. "Who are you?" she eventually replies. I hate it when people answer a question with a question. With Dragons, that somehow makes it twice as bad.

"Why are all the Dragons here?" I try. "It's okay, I'm not going to hurt you."

The Gronkle looks wary, but she stares at me, still comprehending the situation. "Not going...to hurt me..." she repeats slowly.

"That's right," I nod.

"You're...not going to hurt me?"

"Nope. I'm just here for some answers, same as you."

She freezes. "Not why we are here."

"Then why are you here?" This could actually work. She's remaining calm, so I am, too. But, to no avail. She growls lowly and takes a threatening stance. I retreat from my figurative advance. "Hey, easy, I'm not going to hurt you, remember? Can you do the same for me? How about something different, what's your name?"

"My...name..."

"Uh huh. Do you have one?"

She nods vigorously but desperately, like she's trying to remember. "My name is-"

Suddenly, the ground rumbles and she immediately flattens to the floor, her eyes mere lines slicing her golden eyes in half. The Gronkle turns her now predatory gaze to me. "Halflings aren't supposed to be here," she announces coldly and emotionless. A shiver runs down my spine. She then lunges towards me.

Which is how I end up being shoved in front of a million Dragons, right at the feet of their Queen. Great plan, Astrid.

The Dragon Queen has changed. Her four wings are now larger, more of

an off shade of blue with darker red accents, her ear flaps having hardened into horns. Her face somehow looks even more stern and intimidating. I didn't think it possible, but her pupils seem to have become even more slit.

"We meet again," I pick myself off the ground and the Dragon Queen stares at me.

"Astrid," she blinks in bewilderment. "Dear halfling, what are you doing here?"

"I came to talk," I say bluntly, doing my best to look unafraid.

"What I mean is how are you here- ah," she suddenly falters and takes a step backwards, growling as she grasps her forehead. Something is obviously causing her pain but I can't say I'm sympathetic. She's been forcing these Dragons to do her bidding, she deserves any pain thrown her way.

"I want to talk," I say firmly.

"Very well," she gasps out, meaning to sound vicious but ending up sounding tired. She turns to address the crowd of Dragons. She lets lose a fearsome Dragon cry and every single one of them cower back in terror. After it rings out, they all scatter as fast as they can. So judge me if I feel slightly bad for these Dragons. "Ooooooh," the Dragon Queen moans.

"Okay, listen-"

"Please give me a moment," she says discontentedly, leaning over with a labored breath. I try not to care, but the curiosity is killing me. She then inhales sharply before snapping back up. It's like a change, too. Her wings are suddenly back to their normal and not quite as daunting size, her horns once again ear flaps, but the biggest difference is that her eyes are no longer slits, but wide and full, like Asmund's or even Hiccup's. I can't help but stare.

"Alright, please, you'll have to be quick," the Dragon Queen says in a very calm and almost \_kind \_tone. I have to ask.

"Holy munge bucket, what in Odin's name just happened?" I exclaim.

"Watch your tongue, young lady," she hisses, her eyes flickering closed before she shuts them and moans in agony, dipping her head for a moment to collect herself. "Sorry, sorry."

"What is going on? And how do you know the gods or swear words?" I demand.

"What is going on is a very broad answer, you'll have to be more specific. Come, please, let us walk. It helps keep my mind clear."

I reluctantly follow her. The Dragon Queen may seem like she's nice for the moment, but it could be an act. I warily eye her as we walk. If, on the rare occasion, we run into a Dragon, it immediately bows and shies away from the Dragon Queen.

"Now then, Astrid, was it? That's a very pretty name. I am sorry we couldn't properly meet before, given the circumstances, it was sadly not possible. But allow me to introduce myself; my name is Valka."

I gape at her in astonishment. "What- how, what do you mean? You're the Dragon Queen! You just tried to kill me, like, last week! You're supposed to be trying to kill me now and- wait, did you say your name was Valka?"

"Yes."

Hmm. Funny, I could swear that name's familiar...

"Okay, but, what happened to the Dragon Queen that hates everyone's guts?"

The Drag- er, Valka, sighs heavily. "That is a very long story. One I fear we do not have long enough for. However, I will try to explain it as best as I can. You see, a long time ago, Vikings started to Bond with Dragon souls. They would become one, thus becoming a hybrid of each in and of itself. One Dragon to one Viking. Has my son explained to you what an Alpha species is?" He hadn't, but he had told me what an Alpha was, so I nod and she continues. "Well, they're a little bit special. Only the strongest Dragon can host an Alpha species, and Vikings just aren't strong enough. I suppose it's a compliment of the sorts, but it is a great burden to Bond with a Dragon Queen."

"Wait..." I cut her off. "So...you Bonded with \_a \_Dragon Queen. Meaning there's more than one?"

"Of different nests, yes. But I am the only one here. This one in particular is called the Red Death. A very cruel species," she spits. I'm a little surprised at this, but who am I kidding? It's probably a trap. Don't let your guard down! "My Dragon, a Stormcutter, is apparently worthy of the Red Death's soul, and I happened to be the host of a Stormcutter. Slowly, the Red Death is overpowering my Dragon. Their instincts are powerful things, very hard to subdue, especially if they want freedom. You see, the Alpha species never left. They were rare back in their prime, and their beings did not Bond with anyone, but rather lingered. You'll find that it is incredibly difficult to kill off an Alpha species, seeing as they don't really die, their souls only regenerate and Bond with another Dragon. This Red Death is very hateful and cruel, she uses her powers for ill. She may not be as powerful as an actual Alpha, but enough to overpower my Stormcutter."

This is strange. I've never heard a Dragon speak like this before- like their Dragon actually is a separate entity and not a part of them. It's almost unnerving. But this Valka knows all of the Viking terms. Why?

"You're not wild born," I come to conclusion.

She slowly shakes her head. "No."

"What tribe?" I ask, clearing my throat.

She darts her eyes around nervously, looking for a way out. Finding none, she drops her shoulders in defeat. "Berk," she whispers. "I was

a Berkian."

"Valka... The name rings a bell. Surely I would remember someone with that name, plus you have Hiccup... Oh gods..." I slowly come into realization. "You're the chief's Bonded wife...oh gods, and that means that Hiccup is..."

"The heir to the Hooligan tribe? Yes." she sighs. Looking deeply regretful. "I can't change what I did. I don't know, maybe if I hadn't taken him, he would have had a better life. But I am selfish, and I was so terrified of what Stoick would think, what the tribe would think. I couldn't leave him behind without knowing the truth."

"The truth?" I question.

"Aye," she responds, still looking down at her clawed hands. "The one you've figured out yourself. You're a very brave young one, Astrid."

I blink in sudden and unexpected flattery. "T-thank you. So, wait... I have one more question."

"Alright- oh," she grimaces, her golden gaze once again flickering. "Make it quick, though," she warns. I nod.

"My Dragon. A Deadly Nadder. I don't have my scales anymore."

"Oh," she cries again, bending over. She then tilts her head up to stare right into my eyes. "Her powers as an Alpha species are great," she chokes out. "She can bring out the Dragon inside of a wild born and..." she shudders, her body racking with fatigue at holding back the Red Death. She gulps. "She can also repel halflings."

If that means what I think it means, the Red Death might be able to help me get rid of my Bond once and for all! Maybe if-

"Do not trust the Red Death. Do not...trust...\_me\_," she growls, her wings beginning to expand and her gaze hardening. Her eyes swivel large and small at a speed that cannot be healthy.

"Beware, Astrid," Valka chokes out, half as herself and half as the Dragon Queen. "You must know. They cannot fight it, it only makes it worse. There is a secret of the Dragons that will be the downfall of all Vikings. Heed it well and-"

She cries out, her voice echoing through the cave. "What secret?" I cry out to her.

Through gritted teeth, she continues. "There is...a Dragon inside us all...waiting to be brought out. Every Viking is destined to Bond, there is a Dragon latched on to all of our souls...They never really left...they are not bad...do not fear them... Please help them to learn...I fear it is too late for me." She lets out a half Draconic and half human scream that rattles through my bones and my eardrums. "Astrid, listen to me. Get out of here. Find Hiccup, save the Dragons, save the Vikings. Please, it's up to you now!"

I stand in shock and horror as her Dragon features grow larger and larger, much scarier than anything I've ever seen. Unlike with Uncle

Finn, there is nothing beautiful. There is only unnatural changing and wrong, wrong, wrong.

"Get out of here!" Valka barks one more time before throwing her head back and \_roaring. \_Only, it's not her roaring. When she looks back down at me, there is no trace of the kind lady that was warning me to run.

I take her advice and I run.

"A-A-A-s-s-tri-"

"No time, Asmund, we gotta go. Now!" I shout to him, flinging myself up on his back and digging my heels into his sides. I feel bad when he yelps, but it does the trick. Suddenly, something grabs onto my arm, yanking me off of Asmund's back. I cry out and Asmund shrieks. I reach for my ax but I can't reach it strapped on my back when the thing has such a tight grip.

"Let me go!" I cry desperately. "Asmund!"

"My name is Helga." a voice states surely. I stop struggling for a moment to gawk at the glue Gronkle holding me. "Tell them to have no fear."

"Them?" I ask, pulling on my arm, but she isn't budging. I can hear the Dragon Queen's angry roars and I need to leave, \_now. \_"The Vikings won't listen, they never will!"

"No Vikings. Please tell them to have no fear. And that I will see them soon." she pleads with me one last time before letting go, and I stumble backwards. Right off a cliff. Before I can fully understand or even think about the Gronkle (Helga's) vague request, I am screaming because falling is \_nothing \_like flying. Flying, it's like cheating the laws of nature and even death. Falling is just being painfully reminded of the gravity's natural profession and hurtling straight towards death.

Someone then grabs my arm and flings me over their back.

I cling to Asmund's wild mess of a mane and hold on for dear life. He beats his powerful wings once, twice, too fast for me to count rhythmically. But before the Dragon Queen can force us back to her side, we're already flying away, cheating death and the very laws of nature.

I try to breathe as I process everything that just happened.

The Dragon Queen is Valka Haddock. Chief Stoick's long lost wife who Bonded so many years ago. And Hiccup's their son. He's...the rightful heir to the tribe. Not that that could ever happen as he's presumed dead or a Dragon (which the latter he is). But still. If Valka hadn't Bonded, Hiccup wouldn't have had the vast chance of Bonding as well. We'd be in the same tribe, we'd know the same people...would we even be friends? I like to think that we'd be friends no matter who we are, but it doesn't change the fact that he's a Dragon and I'm a Viking and there's just no way I can ever trust him.

But he's not wild born. He could have been just like me.



The thought right there is enough to give me a headache, so I move on to the other thing Valka told me. The secret.

\_'Every Viking is destined to Bond. There is a Dragon latched on to all of our souls.'\_

There is only one meaning that it could possibly mean; the Vikings don't Bond. Not really. Because they've already Bonded.

But how can I trust this Valka? It could have been some act. I can't just fall for everything she says just because she acts kind and her eyes become less scary. There has to be something that I'm missing, something that makes it all a trick. This doesn't make any logical sense! And if the Red Death had never left and Bonded to Valka, that means that she's Bonded with two Dragons, which is virtually impossible. This just can't be true. It can't.

But who's the say she is telling the truth? She was a Berkian after all. But no, that does not automatically give her truth rights, or something exotic and ridiculous as that. She's a Dragon now, and I don't trust Dragons.

\_Doesn't mean you don't listen to them, though, \_my mind tells me. I respond by telling it to shut up.

And then what about the blue Gronkle? Who is this mysterious 'them'? Someone back in the tribe, I'm sure. The name Helga sounds oddly familiar, just maybe not quite as familiar as Valka's had. But still... I'm not sure what to think about that.

"W-w-whe-r-re t-t-t-t-to-o?" Asmund questions, soaring high above the clouds.

"J-just outside the village," I tell him, deep in thought. Oh. I suppose Asmund's free now. Abnormally enough, I'm almost...sad, that I'll probably never see him again. But he's just a Dragon, I need to get over myself. "Once we land, you are free to go. Take my advice, though, Asmund; fly away. Fly away from here and don't look back. Stay away from the Dragon Queen, she's no good. Stay safe, alright?"

He nods once, and I can only hope he understood what I had said.

"W-w-w-i-ill A-A-Astrid be-e s-s-a-a-fe-e?" he asks.

I do something that I normally hate to do. I lie.

"Yes," I tell him. "I'll be safe."

Gotta say, it hurts. A lot, really- lying to him like that. He genuinely cares for my safety, and it's slightly touching. Not a lot of people do. I mean, I personally make sure that they know I can take care of myself, but it's been a while since I've felt like anyone actually really cared about Astrid Hofferson and not the soon-to-be shield maiden. When Asmund drops me off, I give him a curt goodbye because that's all that I can manage without breaking down and doing something I'll regret later on. It's weird, I don't actually want him to go. I've only known the purple Nadder for what, a day, and I'm already feeling attached? I really need to get my head

screwed on right again. But for now, I have a tail to fix. And after that, a Dragon to kill.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Okay, lot of stuff, kinda crappy job presenting it, sorry guys. I literally forced myself to write this because I have been procrastinating this chapter for so long. But hey, I technically got it up on my update day! Sorry for the long wait, I promise I'll try to make my writing better next chapter. See you next Wednesday!<strong>

\*\*Oh, also, if you're into Percy Jackson, Rumbling Night Cutter and I have started a co written, modern AU fanfic called Stuck On You that is posted on my account, and RNC is close to having a second chapter up soon so go check that out if you're interested, we would love it if you left a review or something. Anyways, night everybody! (Or morning, you know, whatever time it is there...) Until next chapter.\*\*

## 16. How To Know Your Side

'I'll be safe' I had promised Asmund. As if. I'm a Viking. There is no possible way for me to be safe. Even if I tried. No, not even joking- with my luck, I'd end up severing a foot or some equally important appendage by tripping over it in the forge. Which is basically what I do. Not the whole lose-an-important-appendage, because that would be bad, but tripping over a deadly weapon that has probably been used to either a: kill a Dragon, b: another Viking or c: both. But the echo rings out through the mostly metal workshop and I cringe. So much for being safe...not to mention quiet.

"Wha- what? Who goes there?" I hear Gobber call out from somewhere in the forge, most likely just waking up from falling asleep at the sharpening wheel. No surprise there.

"It's just me, Gobber," I say, still hunching my shoulders in a grimace. My ax is still strapped to my back and it digs into the back of my leg uncomfortably. "It's late...you should probably go to sleep."

"Yeah," -yawn- "you're probably right. "I'm gonna head to my bed now, you should, too. You've got...final exam...tomorrow..."

I pause, counting to twenty. Then, after nothing else, I call out, "Gobber?"

"What! I'm awake! I'm up! Where's the Dragons?" I smile to myself and carefully walk over to his voice. His blacksmith mask has fallen in his face but hangs at an awkward angle. I laugh quietly and rush over to help him. He looks a bit drunk but I can't smell any stagnant ale on his breath, which means he must be pretty tired.

"Alright, Gobber, let's get you to bed now."

I help support the (three hundred and eighty-five pound!) Viking to his room, where he then falls flat on his face with his limbs sprawled about everywhere and is asleep within moments of hitting the bed. I sigh, breathing heavily. It's not exactly an easy feat helping

that guy out when he's tired and/or drunk, and trust me when I say that I have first hand experience with both.

"Astrid," Gobber mumbles just as I leave. I freeze, turning around slowly.

"Yes?" I say quietly. I observe him for movements, but he's really just sleep talking. I instantly relax. I don't like people listening.

"I'm proud of you," he mutters before turning over in a very mature and Viking-ish sleeping position (not) and leaving me just the tiniest dumbfounded. The compliment's touching in a way that I can't quite comprehend, nor am I used to. I mean, it doesn't feel...bad. It's actually kind of nice. I just don't understand it. Nobody's ever really proud of me. They're intimidated, wary, respectful, and pitying of me, but never proud. The concept is a little foreign, so I deal with it the best way I can; I push it to the very edge of my mind where I will probably never have to think about it again.

I creep into my room to grab Hiccup's tail before sneaking back into the forge. Gobber's often up late working, nobody will be suspicious of some late night banging metal on metal. I don't think anyone will mind. Snotlot might get skiffed on his beauty sleep but who honestly cares?

Something about being in the forge calms me down. It's strange, really, because if I hadn't been raised by Gobber I would most definitely think that it was a stupid and pointless job. We give our weapons to the blacksmith and he fixes them, simple as that. But there's so much more than that, and I like to think that it's where I get the logical part of my brain, small as that may be. Okay, fine, how about more like the strategic part of my brain, that makes more sense.

The thing is, Vikings don't really go to school, we go to Dragon Training. They don't teach us further than basic math and language, as well as the bare minimum of reading. Knowledge outside of the battlefield isn't classified as important, so we never do anything more than scraping the bottom of the barrel- and only just. Which is kind of stupid, if anyone asked me, not that they ever do. Strategy is just as important as knowing your enemy, and how else do you learn the right calculations if you don't learn the calculations in the first place? Sure, quick wit and reflexives will save your life, but if you don't know what to do other than attack your opponent head on, how can you ever win? Putting some thought into it is exactly what I get from the forge. If you mess up on one tiny detail, it's game over and you have to start all over again, most of the time from scratch. And then you get to face the wrath of whatever Viking owns the weapon you messed up on. Believe it or not, Vikings are very fond of their weapons; it's the closest thing to a baby blanket we ever get.

Hiccup's tail is by far the most intricate invention I have ever made. I am quite proud of myself, as it only took a few days for it to be completed, and the most of one night for most of it to be done, with the added days being used for measurements and adjustments. The tail has to be perfect and can have no error, or else Hiccup might find himself falling to the ground and fast. Luckily, he's a Dragon and can hopefully glide down somewhat gently to safety, but you never

know, I suppose. Not to mention when he gets older, taller, and grows out of his tail. I might even have to redesign it entirely! I don't know. Maybe he'll fly as far away as possible after this, never to see me again. It's highly plausible. I mean, we're friends (\_don't even think about \_it), but he's a Dragon and I'm a Viking. And from what Valka told me, I'm no longer Bonding. Not that that's a bad thing, cause it isn't... I don't think... I mean, it isn't. It definitely isn't a bad thing.

Valka Haddock. Chief Stoick's wife. Hiccup's mother. The needle I'm using to probe around the tail slips and jabs into my hand. I cry out and wince in pain, cursing at the inanimate object as if it purposely hurt me. Thoughts are dangerous if misguided, and all I have ever done in my life is learn to control them. This strange and foreign sense of overwhelming thoughts just cannot comprehend in my mind. Valka is not only the long lost chief's wife, but she's Bonded with two Dragons, one being a Dragon Queen whose ruthless hand (er, claw...?) reigns over all the Dragons in the area, amplifying wild born Dragons' innermost instincts and repelling, even dispersing, Dragons in the midst of Bonding, or, halflings, as the Dragons call them.

But wait...

Hiccup isn't wild born. His Dragon will have left, he might be shivering in the cold right now because Odin knows the clothes he has on right now aren't enough for a skimpy Viking like him. Maybe for a lean Night Fury, but not for Hiccup. And yet...he's not wild born, but I can't imagine him without the reptilian part of him. He's not a separate entity infested with the parasite that is the Night Fury, he simply \_is \_the Night Fury. They are one in the same, they can't survive without the other. Hiccup is nothing without the Night Fury, or, no, not even that. He simply is a Dragon. It's not an added part of him, he might as well have been born a Dragon and not Bonded as a baby.

I'm honestly not sure how the Dragon Queen's aura will effect him. Will he no longer be a Night Fury when I next bring his tail? Or is Bonding from a baby enough for him? I'm not sure. All this overthinking is hurting my brain. (Hey, just because I think that Vikings need a higher level of education doesn't mean that I had all that much time to dedicate myself to it. Desires and actions are two very different things.)

Hiccup had pointed to an area that he believed the problem to be, and though he doesn't know much about mechanics, I might as well start somewhere. I glare at the needle in hand that had previously poked into my skin and pick it up, along with one of Gobber's telescope. We had found that if one adjusted it just so, it could act as a magnifying device for close up inspections.

I take the needle and poke around a bit in the tailfin part. At least he didn't point to the leg where most of the intricate metal works are. Just fixing it is tedious enough. Somehow, my brain wanders back to what Valka had said. How can I trust her?

That seems to be the question of the time being. The major one that I'm always worrying about. Who can I trust? No one, that's who. And yet, I'm not satisfied with that answer.

Strange, there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with the tail...

I turn my focus back to the task at hand, peering through the telescope to look closer. I twist my mouth in a concerned frown. I place the telescope down and quietly step over to my wall where all the blueprints are tacked up. I frown at them, too. I wander back to my desk and peer down at the designs. There's nothing wrong with it that I can see.

For the next few minutes, I go through and observe every part of it, even the leg part with all the gears. I creep outside to check the time and luckily, it's still dark. I groan in frustration and go back inside. Why isn't the prosthetic working, then?

Perhaps...did Hiccup lie? No, there was definitely something wrong...but then again, his flight hadn't been off. But why would Hiccup lie about that?

Just for good measure, I check the gears. They seem to be running and changing with the satisfying clicks and correct sounds. Hm. What was it that he said was up? The descent? I can't remember. Great. Serves me right for not paying attention. Okay, so maybe I was the tiniest bit distracted with the whole...Hiccup ordeal, let's call it, and I may have forgotten a few details. But can you blame me? No? Well, I'm not blaming me, and the only one's opinion I really care about is, what do you know, mine.

I click lazily for the gear that gives him the ability to take off from a vertical angle and something snaps.

It's not a major snap or anything that sounds irreparable, but there's definitely some twinge that is not right. I perk up and slowly switch the gear again, listening for it. This time, there's nothing, but I'm not about to give up. Take off and descent, that's what he said. Sure enough, when I try the dive descent gear, something else twinges out of place, but only once before falling silent.

I quickly grab the telescope and adjust its viewpoint to closeup. The sound was a little hard to place, so I keep switching the gears and hoping I'll hear its location now that I'm actually paying attention. I switch the descent gear and-

\_Twing!\_

What do you know, Hiccup was right, it is in the tail. More like at the very base, where there isn't a lot of metalwork but enough to be considered difficult. Alright, I've got this. My training with Gobber kicks in and I completely banish any and all thoughts of Valka, Hiccup, and Dragons in general from my mind.

I squint as I work with the needle to sift through the parts. The needle helps me move through things without messing them up, and it's strong enough that it won't break. Technically, it's a sewing needle, made of yak bone, but Gobber and I use them all the time and I'd rather die than using a sewing needle for its intended purpose. Not that I don't know how to sew... Interesting tale, one I'd rather not recall. I'll just state that it was the worst two hours of my life.

I keep moving along. There's a small, tiny cord running from the tailfin and along the metalwork along to his waist. Surrounding the cord are a few metal disk-like copper nuts that keep it in place, allowing the cord to correctly pull the tail in gears for each change Hiccup would make. One of the disks is bent and scratched.

It's an easy enough of a fix, but sure took me long enough to find it. I've been switching through the gears and inspecting the tail for so long, the sun is starting to come up! Luckily, all I have to do is run into the forge and find something to replace the damaged disk. And if I have to make a new one, well, they're only about the size of my fingernail, plus I have the blueprints for it all...somewhere...so it won't be too much work to simply make a new one.

Now, how it got damaged in the first place is a whole different story. Something as minuscule as this would have to be a very interesting accident. Not only is it this tiny disk placed under delicate metal work that would be protected from friction and has no sign of rust, but it's only this one disk. Perfectly placed where it wouldn't effect his flight but would be enough of a damage to make his flight unstable. Something natural like this is highly unlikely. But that would mean that someone would have had to tamper with it and Hiccup can't use his hands all that well...or at all, really.

But then...if it got really cold out, and then Hiccup had visited his mother, who had inured him... It's very likely that Valka could have accidentally hit his tail while in Dragon Queen form (you know, if she's telling the truth and all), and if the disks were already cold from the winter air, then one of them could have broken. I'd have to warn him about knocking his tail into things. I know that that's probably an inevitable event to occur, as he's a Dragon and what if he needs it during a fight? But if it's a danger like that, it could possibly lead to further threats.

Much to my delight, there's exactly the disk I need somewhere in the bottom of Gobber's extra parts bucket. Don't ask me how I found it, I'm surprised enough, myself. Maybe I misjudged and the gods don't hate me so much after all. I mean, a good streak of luck has been happening, so who could tell? First, Hiccup comes back, albeit, with a lot of mixed feelings and unwanted emotions, and then I don't get killed by the Dragon Queen who turns out to actually be good(?), and now I solve Hiccup's tail issues in one night? I'm on a roll. I better not speak too fast, though. Luck only gets you so far on the battlefield.

Thinking about it, everything just sounds really confusing. Oh well, that's just the way it goes, I guess.

Slowly, I pick away the damaged bits of the old disk that is keeping the cord in place with the needle. Luck again is on my side and I don't drop any in a hard-to-reach or irretrievable crevice. I carefully guide the new disk into place, clicking it in place. Alright then.

I stand up for a moment and stretch out my back that has been leaning over for the past few hours. I yawn, but I'm not too tired. Sure, I have the big final exam (gulp) tomorrow, but sleep has never been a big priority of mine. Bad habits, yes, I know, but who has the time for it? I sure don't, what with training, studying, training, worrying over the fate of my tribe, training, yeah... It's a lot more

vigorous than one might imagine.

Before I turn in for the night- er, morning- I want to check all the other gears and disks, just to make sure they're fine, too. Which means back to the needle. I pick up the sharp, carved bone and proceed to peer down into the telescope, searching through the cords and metal pieces. It gives me a sense of satisfaction, seeing this creation of mine serving its purpose. I mean, yes, I'm fixing it because it had a problem, but it works and I made it. Vikings are a little bit vain, as well, and I can't say that I'm immune to all petty Viking casualties.

While I'm searching through the gears, my mind finally comes around to think about what Valka had said about the Dragons and herself, and also about me. She was Bonding with an Alpha Species, which isn't technically an Ancestral Dragon...or, is it? I'm not too sure. I only got a few minutes to ask questions. And given answers that I'm not even sure are true. Honestly, though, how can I trust a lady who claims to be Valka Haddock? She could be fake, for all I know. But who else would know who Valka Haddock is? No one. And I haven't had the chance to ask Hiccup about it. I don't even want to think about tomorrow. I'm back to square one with 'who can I trust?' I really don't know what to believe, what separates true from fabricated. Can I trust Valka?

Oh my gods, I am such an idiot.

"Ow!" I curse as I leap up in realization and manage to poke myself with it \_again.\_

As I suck the small droplets of blood, my mind races as I remember. Because how could I forget? I'm an idiot, that's why. Of course the conversation Hiccup and I had a couple days previous completely \_slipped \_my mind! When he had told me that his mother had Bonded with two Ancestral Dragons, I had believed him. And then, when Valka only confirmed it, the information completely slipped my mind and I could have used that as proof the whole time! But if they're stories match up, that means that Valka isn't lying...she really isn't the Dragon Queen. And that also means that everything else she said is true. There really are Ancestral Dragons inside us all. But...how can this happen? I'm not the hero. But, according to Valka, it's up to me, now? Why not the acclaimed Night Fury who could do so much than me, I'm sure. I can't just... But it makes sense in my mind, everything that she told me. I'm greatly troubled just because it seems right to me, as if I can't accept anything else. I should be hating her guts, Hiccup's as well, but really, I just want to help them. It's all so backwards and tossed and tumbled around, and I'm losing my mind.

But one thing's for sure; it really is up to me to save the Vikings and the Dragons...before Valka completely loses control.

\* \* \*

><p>The first thing I realize when I wake up is that I had fallen asleep at my desk, and there's an embarrassing little puddle of drool building up on the wood. I wipe it off and thank Odin that no one saw. But hey, the tail is done and I'm happy to report that nothing else is wrong with it. Hiccup should be good to go. Which brings me to my second realization; I overslept. And now, it's late in the

morning and if I leave to give Hiccup his tail back, I'll be far too late. I mentally curse and grab the tail, untacking all my blueprints and running the prosthetic up to my room only to shove it underneath my bed alongside the Dragon Manual.<p>

Hiccup will have to wait. In the mean time, I need to figure out what the heck I am going to do. Wait, no, there is no 'what am I doing to do'. I am going to pass my exam and become a full Viking, that's what. There is no what if, there's only what's going to happen. I tell myself this while my mind asks me if I really have it in me to kill a Dragon after everything I've learned. I tell it that I do and pray to the gods that I'm not lying.

"There you are, Astrid," Gobber exclaims when he sees me in the morning. I have my ax draped across my back, my bangs swooping low in my eyes and I'm sure I don't look very happy, not that I ever do, but Gobber ignores the obvious as per usual.

"Morning," I grumble, shuffling my feet along and keeping my eyes trained to the ground. I still wear my arm wrappings even though there aren't any scales anymore. It's like some symbol of safety and I don't feel quite appropriate without them. Call me a creature of habit, I suppose.

"Are you ready?"

I lie right through my teeth: "Absolutely."

"Knock 'em dead, girl," he pats my shoulder heartily in an ironic joke. I wince and play it off like his hit actually hurt, when really, the thought of knocking any Dragon dead is slightly queasy. I'm not all that sure why. Dead things have never bothered me before. I have seen plenty of Dragons and Vikings alike get killed, most of the time by each other, and I've seen dead bodies being treated to by Gothi as well. (Oh, sorry, maybe a little too much? Well, hate to break it to you, but we're Vikings. Death is kind of a big part that happens around here.) Like I said, it's never bothered me. And all I've ever trained for and all I've ever wanted is to kill a Dragon. Now, the opportunity is being handed to me on a silver plate and I don't want it. I mean, I do want it, I just don't want to, no, I mean- oh, forget it.

"Hey, Astrid?" Gobber looks at me, strangely serious.

"Yeah?" I ask, turning around and shielding my eyes. He might be good at ignoring the obvious, but he's uncannily bad at missing little details.

He looks hesitant. "We've been fighting this war between Dragons for a long time. Know which side you're on. I'll- us Vikings will be there behind you."

I nod, stiff in my posture. I turn my back and run off before he can see my true reaction. Once I'm sure I'm out of sight, I sigh heavily and allow my eyes to widen like they've been wanting to do since he said that.

Why would he say that? Does he know that I'm possibly going to become a traitor to my tribe, even more so than I already am? Can he perhaps sense my unease?



The arena comes into view sooner than I'd like. I don't know why I'm dreading this so much. This is supposed to be exactly what I've been waiting for my whole entire life, it's what I've been dreaming about since forever. I'm not a traitor. That's not who I am. I'm a Viking. So what, I made a promise. I'll keep my end of the deal for it, but that's it. I have to do this. I can't just throw away my whole life for one thing a Dragon told me. \_I'm not a hero.\_

I can hear them all chanting my name, cheering my success and screaming in joy. Why? Because they're Vikings who can, enough said. I wish they wouldn't, though. There's enough going on in my head already without all the extra words. The noise is almost too much, but I push away any doubts and thoughts of Dragons to the back on my mind, chaining it up and locking it tight just for good measure. After that, I throw away the the key.

"Well, I don't think anyone's surprised with this outcome, eh?" I hear Chief Stoick's booming voice coming from the outside of the arena as I enter to the side door, waiting. I reach back and grab my ax, swinging it down so that it's in front of me. It willingly locks into position, molding into my hands. This is what's comfortable. It's familiar, a warming presence that I know as well as my own self. This is everything that I've ever worked for, right here in my hands. I realize just how much my ax represents who I am, just like my arm bindings symbolize my safety. This is what I've been working my butt off for every day of my life, just for this moment right here. For the entire tribe screaming my name, for my ax in my hand, for me to be waiting for Chief Stoick to call me out so that I can finally kill a Dragon and earn my place among true Vikings. Only, things aren't as simple as they were before. Now I know... But I can't afford to throw it all away just like that. I need this. I'm a warrior, a soldier. That's all I've ever been, that's all I'll ever be.

"Today, the tribe's most promising shield maiden will finally earn her ranks among us. Today, a brave Viking will be made, right before our very eyes. Today, Astrid Hofferson becomes one of us!" The crowd roars in approval, making me wince again. My place among them. Oh, if they only knew what was really going on. But they don't, and they never will. I officially decide that as of right now. After I become a full fledged Viking, I'll give Hiccup's tail back and we'll forget any of this ever happened, I swear. This time I mean it. This time, for sure.

The gates open and I step in, keeping my eyes on the ground. I don't bother to brush my bangs out of my eyes, I don't intend to meet anyone's eyes but the Dragon's.

I take a deep breath and glance up at Stoick, nodding curtly to signal that I'm ready. Right as I look down again, I catch Gobber's blue gaze for half of a second and I remember what he said to me. But I don't look back at him and I lock the words up tight right alongside my doubt and thoughts of the Dragons. His key goes into oblivion as well.

The loud crank of the cage opening is almost painfully slow. I bring my ax into position, commanding my body not to flinch at the loud and dramatic entrance this Dragon is sure to make. All it takes it one bright, spontaneous explosion for me to know that it's the Monstrous Nightmare. Fire is everywhere, even though it only comes from one

manly figure who is far from a man. Well, males are thick headed, anyways, easier to deal with. Much more of a direct approach with them. No offense intended to any males, or anything, it's just the truth.

I can't quite tell if the Nightmare's actually red or if it's just the fire coating its scales. All Dragons are fireproof to some extent, this species can just hold it. I'm not going to lie and say that it's not a rather impressive trait. The Dragon roars and though he is only one being, it's louder than all the now-silent Vikings' cheers had been. I refuse to cover my ears, though. I patiently wait for it to notice me as it scrambles around frantically, most likely getting used to the light and being surrounded by its mortal enemy. Are Vikings even its mortal enemy? I thought so, but if they're only being forced to fight against us by the Dragon Queen... Apparently, oblivion isn't all that reliable. Especially for holding keys.

He thrusts one of his hands out, setting loose a jet of molten fire at anyone unfortunate enough to be in its pathway. I hope no one is, that would be a big damper on the celebratory event. Not that...um, never mind. He then scampers along the wall with the speed of a thought, barely trackable with my naked eyes. His wings, ignited with fire, flap a couple times, sending him shooting up to attach to the chain link ceiling. He shoots out another burst of flames with the flick of a hand. I'm still waiting.

The Nightmare roars and I grow frustrated. Oh, for Odin's sake, enough already! I drop the blade of my ax and allow it to collide into the metallic floor, ringing out and catching the attention of the Dragon's keen ears. It stops and hangs from the ceiling, frozen. Smoke curls off of its scales, its posture rigid and at complete attention. Now that it's still, I finally get a good look at my opponent. It certainly is male, a rather bulky male. Yes, his scales are definitely red, a deep, dark, crimson red faded with age and darkness. Black stripes are seared across its skin and its large, pointed wings come out from its arms, its tail a long and winded with a singular tail fin on the very top of the end.

Ever so slowly, it lets go of the ceiling, falling to the ground like a heavy boulder. It lands with a loud boom! and slowly raises its eyes to meet mine. For a second- just a second, I swear that its golden eyes flicker green, but it must be a trick of the light. Dragons' eyes aren't green. I glare right back at it, daring, just daring it to come and get me. It growls out a challenge and I narrow my cool blue eyes which I'm sure are as clouded as a stormy Berkian day. The Nightmare flicks out its unnaturally forked tongue, sizing me up.

But suddenly, it's not a Monstrous Nightmare anymore. The red coloration seemingly fades off of its sides, its wings begin to grow, its body begins to shrink, its tail changing. Slowly, the red fades to a dark, cream shade of white, and a second pair of wings grow right underneath the first and are tinged with a light red. The thick, stout body shrinks into that of an older woman just past her prime with a cringing face. Its tail lengthens and flattens out, the tail fin splitting into two and falling to either side of the tip. The Nightmare's dark, greasy hair grows out into a tangled mass of brown, and the overall stern gaze looses its intensity as I am no longer staring at a faceless Dragon, but at that of a female Stormcutter.

\_Find Hiccup, \_the Nightmare-turned-Valka reaches out with her hands, her eyes pained and pleading, \_save the Dragons, save the Vikings. Please, it's up to you now!\_

As soon as the words are in my head, the large Stormcutter's color is drained from its very body, slowly being reshaded as a vibrant hue of purple. The second pair of wings shrivel up until they are no more and the first pair shrink into spindly, pointy ones that descend to attach to the quickly thickening arms of a male. The curved, slim body rapidly gains in weight and shape, as well as the brown tangled mess turns to graying blonde with an impressive set of horns protruding out. The smooth, slender tail darkens to a purple as well and small spikes grow into large, poisonous ones with deadly aim and accuracy.

\_W-w-w-i-ill A-A-As-trid b-b-be s-s-a-f-f-e-fe? \_Asmund stutters, genuinely concerned for me.

He, too, then disperses, but when the wings, tail, and golden eyes slip away, they stay gone. Instead, two of Asmund's appendages retract within themselves, replaced with wooden garments of Viking invention. His unruly and untamed beard falls away in a light blonde and uneven braided mustache, his horns molding into a Viking helmet. This transformation is quick and almost over with in the blink of an eye.

Gobber looks me in the eyes and says, \_We've been fighting this war between Dragons for a long time. Know which side you're on.\_

His face is then wiped away, too. I really should have expected this one, but the next change still throws me for a loop. Gobber is shrouded in darkness as everything shrinks and two eerily black wings shoot out from his back as his now scrawny frame arches its back. Claws extend from his fingers a long, slim, and \_black, black, black \_tail expands from his tail bone, with tail fins unrolling. Well, only one. The other is missing. Blonde hair turns to auburn brown and the mustache falls away as well. A slightly tanned, whiskery face reveals a smooth but dirty and highly freckled face. The once golden, once blue eyes turn green, shifting their focus right on me. The black scales are still falling into place like one, giant puzzle. The long tail curls around the bare feet, allowing me to fully see what I have done.

Unlike the others, Hiccup doesn't give me some longing, pitying, or pleading gaze. He simply stares at me with those large draconic eyes of his. I would almost prefer it if he gives me something sinister or haunting. Instead, all I get from his is: \_I trust you.\_

I blink and Hiccup is gone. This time, though, there's no transformation. There's no anything. There's simply where Hiccup once was, now there's someone else. And that someone else is a Deadly Nadder. That someone else is me.

Me, Astrid Hofferson. Only, I have wings. And a spiked tail. And a crown of white horns. And claws. Blue is the color of my Nadder, but I'm not quite sure how I know this. All I can think is 'it's me'. The only sign of transformation is in my eyes as they fade from Hiccup's vibrant green and I am suddenly drowning in \_gold, gold, gold.\_

The other me stares directly into my own blue eyes, making me hold my breath. The other me smiles and shakes out her wings, as if she's always been like this.

\_Dreams change, \_I hear, but I'm not entirely sure if it's from the other me or my own mind. Possibly both. \_You can do this, but will you?\_

I blink again and everyone is gone. There is only the nameless Monstrous Nightmare whose fate lies with me. He snorts and glares at me, showing no signs of surrender. That makes two of us. Voices in my head are only that. It shifts its position, and I catch a few mumbled encouragements from the crowd. I'm not listening, though. I don't need help.

\_You can do this, but will you? Will you?\_

\_Will I?\_

All the faces blur together, all the words become meaningless garbling, all the Dragons fly off in search of anything that makes sense. I want to join them, but I'm stuck because I can't fly and I'm a Viking and I have to face my problems the only way I know how; by running at it with my ax in hand because that's what's familiar. Screw what anyone else wants, this is who I am. I am not a hero, I'm only a girl.

The Dragon's lips curl back in a vicious snarl, showing off two rows of razor sharp fangs. This is not a person. This is a mindless beast. Generally, I keep a cool head and I don't talk during a fight. But this time, just this once, I allow myself to say something, simply because it's turning around in my mind and \_someone \_needs to take the blame. The Dragon adjusts its hands-and-knees position, conforming to a defensive state. I can see its eyes dilating into slits. I grip my ax harder. This Dragon wants a fight, but so do I.

"You want a battle? I'll give you a war," I growl.

I lunge at the Nightmare the same time it roars and shakes the entire arena.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Dear my one anonymous reviewer,<strong>

\*\*First off, I want to thank you for your continuous reviews. It really means a lot to know that someone is enjoying and anticipating every chapter. They really helped me out, especially when a lot of my progress got deleted accidentally and I had to start all over again.\*\*

\*\*Whew, this chapter got crazy long, huh? Oh, I think my new favorite quote of the story is in this chapter. If anyone guesses it correctly then...hmm, well, I don't have any cool prizes or anything...never mind, then. But hey, anyone catch all of those movie references with a twist? There was quite a few of them, actually. Feedback is highly appreciated and encouraged, though.\*\*

\*\*Anyway, I'm sorry I didn't post last update. The day came around

and I just didn't have anything ready until now, not even joking. I'll try for next week, but I wouldn't count on it. I'm gonna be going out of town that weekend and I'm busy all this weekend and I'm trying to finish this painting for my mom's birthday and I am sorta-kind-a-maybe swamped, if you can't tell. Plus, I now have Stuck On You to work on now so there's that as well. Not to franchise it or anything but you should totally go check it out... Thank you all for your support and I hope you are enjoying the story so far! Review, follow, the usual stuff. Until next update, whenever/wherever that may be!\*\*

## 17. How To Choose Your Side

Here's the thing about Monstrous Nightmares; they tend to back off from a frontal approach. They recognize superiority and then move to fight defensively rather than offensively, meaning that all you've got to do is watch out for the fire and you've got a dead Dragon. Of course this Monstrous Nightmare happens to be the one in every forty of it's species that doesn't follow this theory.

The red Nightmare roars right back at me and launches itself into the air somersaulting gracefully and skidding back to the ground on the other side of me. His hands flicker with fire and crackle against the cool Berk air. His lips are still curled back in a vicious snarl and he would look rather intimidating if I weren't a Viking.

"Bring it," I challenge, giving a snarl myself. He growls and shoots his hands out, a burst of lava-like fire shooting out from midair. I duck, narrowly missing the stream of fire that sizzles on the algid metal floor. I glance at it for half a second, only slightly registering that those flames could have easily hit me.

I quickly dive again as he lunges for me, claws outstretched and jaws full of razor sharp teeth unhinged. I roll away in a smooth and elegant reverse tumble. The Dragons growls and stretches out his wings, causing his added height to be extremely noticeable and intended to intimidate me. It doesn't work. I've seen scarier.

\_Come on, I've survived an encounter with the \_Night Fury \_before, you don't scare me!\_ I shout out at it in my mind. Of course I can't say that out loud, that would kind of ruin things, but he seems to get the point. I can't really blame him. Dragons are smarter than we give them credit for, and though I've heard Hiccup make a snide comment about Nightmares' intelligence, I'm sure this Dragon knows that only one of us is going to be leaving this arena. I'm not about to stay behind. As of right now, it's my training against his instincts. I know that mine is enough, and I'm certain I can take this Dragon on.

The Monstrous Nightmare growls, retracting back and coiling his body in a snakelike manner. He suddenly shoots out a jet of flames and I dart to the side, coming up unscathed but slightly ticked off. As we go along, the attacks from the Nightmare become less constant. For such a supposedly difficult beast, this Dragon doesn't attack all that much.

Eventually, I'm done beating around the bush and I scream out, ignoring all the voices that scream in my mind. I can't listen to them. I swear, I'm not actually crazed(at least, I don't think I am),

I can just hear and see these things (pretty sure that makes me crazed...). This Dragon has been mine to kill and mine alone, all of my life I've been training for this. I can't stress it enough. and I might have said it two dozen times, maybe more, but I simply need to get it in my head. Killing Dragons is part of who I am; a Viking, and I can't let anything get in the way of that.

Except for the part where I already have. Hiccup's gotten under my skin and I allowed it. Not voluntarily, but I wasn't objecting when he became my friend. I just don't understand. My own brain is becoming jumbled and I can't think straight from everything that's going on. All of these contradictory thoughts and flat out emotions my simple minded brain generally tries to avoid. Vikings aren't meant for critical thinking, if you haven't figured it out yet. We like to think one thing and then change our minds the next, that's just the way it goes and if someone doesn't like it then they can fight them. Literally.

Dragons are bad, simple as that. They don't have a conscious, they don't have a soul, and they certainly cannot become friends with Vikings. That concept is not difficult to grasp, it never was to me, but now it is. I can't keep continuing to betray my tribe like this, though. Who I am is very important to me and Astrid Hofferson is not a traitor. I'm just...repaying a debt, is all, and it happened to not be quite as bad as I thought it would be. But not everything lasts. Especially something as fragile as peace between a Viking and a Dragon. Or, maybe it can last, but not without bringing down every known custom and way of each species first.

I suppose I should also be focusing on the Dragon that's attacking me now. That might be slightly important. To be perfectly honest, it really isn't. I've been training for this my whole life and all I'm doing is dodging it and thinking about something else. This is supposed to be the best moment of my life, the moment where I fully become what I'm meant to be. Then...why does it feel so dull? Empty? Unsatisfying? No, not quite. It's certainly enthralling, but not so, I don't know, spectacular. It's not amazing as in the moment I'm going to remember for the rest of my life. I'm simply pitting against a Dragon and it's not special.

Fire may not be special, but it sure is one hell of a way to snap me out of my thoughts.

I gasp when I very nearly get a face full of molten Monstrous Nightmare fire, ducking just in time. The Dragon roars angrily and lunges at me, his wings fully fledged and snapping his fangs. So much for not quite a defensive Dragon. Now, he's all on attack. Great.

I grip my ax and take off in a full sprint. Normally, it wouldn't be a good idea to run from a Dragon, as they are hybrids of lightning fast creatures and their endurance surely will outweigh your own, but this Nightmare is out of shape and panicked, whereas I am calm, collected, and not to mention extremely athletic. Not to brag or anything, but just, you know, been training for this my whole life.

Again, though, with the fact of overusing this. I need to get it. This is what I'm meant to do. My battle ax in hand, my heart beating out of my chest, facing a Dragon in combat, this is who I am. I am a Viking. Vikings don't associate with Dragons, and Astrid Hofferson is

not a traitor.

I inexplicably skid to a halt and dive to the ground and the Nightmare goes soaring over my head. He tumbles to a stop on the other side, rebounding as fast as I can get up with his hands smoking. My gods, is the thing out of fire yet? How many more shots does he have?

Apparently, quite a few more as I'm sent racing in the other direction and dodging several attempts at being burned to a blackened crisp. I'm confident because I can keep up this game of chase longer than he can. Eventually, he'll get bored or too tired.

Soon enough, he does and that's when I scatter back to the center of the ring. His skin is smoking as well but he's finally met his shot limit. My eyes dart to the side to see if something can be used to my advantage. I don't get the time to think too much about it because the Nightmare then runs at me and performs a very Viking-like maneuver of punching my face. Unfortunately for him, Dragons aren't used to using their hands and he's rather slow. I, on the other hand, am quick as a viper and return the move with a successful fist to the side of his face. He roars more out of frustration than pain as something like that can't have hurt a Dragon's skin too much. The punch distracts him but now my fist is raw and pulsing to its own heartbeat.

The Monstrous Nightmare blindly lashes out with his claws and I jump back, but I guess not quick enough. A shower of sparks catch my attention in the corner of my eye and a fairly decent sized red slash runs across my arm. My left metal shoulder pad now has a grey scratch from where the Nightmare's claws collided with it and the cut follows in suit. I can't even feel the pain, I'm so hyped up on adrenaline, but that blasted Dragon still got the honor of first blood.

He senses it, too, as his golden eyes dilate into small slits and he growls. I don't move to cover the blood running down my arm, instead, I turn back to the Dragon and snarl.

We both leap at each other in the same instance. Now is the time in which I really wish I had a dagger. When there's a Dragon who can move almost faster than you with triple the mass and is up close with natural weapons, it's a bit hard to swing. After a flurry of clawing, kicking, snapping, and vicious beating of the Nightmare's wings, I'm finally hit in the stomach by one and flung across the arena like a corn husk doll, falling to the ground and gasping for breath like a fish out of water. The Dragon waits barely a second before it soars over and pins me down, its lips curled back and flashing the deadly canines.

While my ax slid over a few feet from me, I am not completely helpless. I quickly use simply instincts and bring my leg jerking upwards to knee him in a very male area, and he howls and flaps his way off of me. When I'm up with my ax in place, he glares at me with complete and utter disgust. I don't hesitate when I aim my ax and hurl it as his head. Of course he dodges it but it lands me a nice slice across the inside of his waist. He cries out and jumps into the air while I scurry to retrieve my ax once again. I turn around just in time to see him duck diving at me but I'm not fast enough to avoid getting bowled over, and we both are sent tumbling across the ground.

Remember when I said he's nearly triple my weight? Well, when the Dragon happens to roll on top of me several times it doesn't exactly feel like a pile of blankets. It hurts. But I won't let it slow me down. I wince as I attack him in hand to claw combat, his skin steaming as his fire recharges. I have to hurry or else he'll have the advantage of fire again.

I can honestly say that the most part of the fight does not process into my mind. I think I might get several injuries, but nothing too serious or that I'll bleed out from. Surely the Nightmare's screams are enough to prove that I am more than capable enough.

Suddenly, the Nightmare swipes his tail across my feet, and while this is an easy enough move to hop up and over, his wings are suddenly in my face and there's nothing I can do before they slap my body away like a pesky fly. Yet again the air is knocked out of my and I struggle to get up hurriedly.

I don't know how this works, but there are just some moments where the laws of time simple do not exist, and you can see everything with perfect clarity. The parts that went by in a flash all add together in this one moment with the Nightmare lunging at me, his fangs drawn back in the most vicious snarl, his claws outstretched and his wings dauntingly enormous. There's a murderous gleam in his eyes and I can't help but think that this is simply a Dragon who has no choice but to fight for his life.

But it's me or him, and I'm sorry, but, Vikings aren't exactly known for their selflessness.

My limbs move as if the air has gained in density and I cannot bring anything to function as quickly as I'd like. This moment may seem like it's in slow motion but who knows how much time I really have? That's just something I'll never know.

\_How much time do I really have?\_

This could be Hiccup, my mind whispers to me. It's not. It's not, he's not here, he's just a Dragon, I don't care, I don't care, I don't care.

\_I'll only know when it's all gone...\_

This could be Hiccup, this could be Hiccup, this could be Hiccup, my mind chants over and over and I furrow my brow in frustration, until, at the very end, my thoughts cut off with one last haunting echo; \_this could be you.\_

\_...when it's too late to get it backâ€¦\_

But it's not. I am a Viking and I kill Dragons. Simple as that. Simple, that's the word to know. That's all I need to think. No elaborate, complicated emotions, no emotions, period. It's a kill or be killed world, and I refuse to be prey.

\_...when my time is upâ€¦\_

The Nightmare lunges at me, and I sidestep with positively nothing and absolutely everything on my mind as I bring the blade of my ax



down.

\* \* \*

><p>Color.<p>

That's the only solid thing I can pull from all the thoughts floating, swimming, screaming in my mind. Well, that and noise, but that's kind of painful, so I push that away.

Berk is a rather dull community with as much color as a grayscale world can have. I've never been one for bright colors, anyway. We paint our shields all the different colors that are absent in our natural environment. I don't really understand what it is that's so important about them to a human mind. Nobody else needs a little color in their lives to feel happy. Everything else is perfectly content with the ever-present grey. Why aren't we? Why are we so desperate for change? Why do we spend so much time worrying about looking different from one another?

I just don't get it.

But who knew, huh? Colors. What a vibrant word in and of itself. Colors are actually kind of funny. I suppose we are kind of like them. Really, colors are all the same thing in different hues with matches of other hues to create some illusion of beauty. When they're all thrown together, they all become dull and an ugly, fuddled brown. We may be independant and great, but really, we all come from the same grayscale of different shades of black and white.

We're not so different.

Too bad, I suppose, that I learn this a little late. We're all colors, put together in an ugly brown that will never be anything beautiful unless we can make it something different. If we don't, it's just going to stay the same. Nothing will ever change.

I wasn't ready to do something this big, something so outlandishly out there and leave all things familiar in the dust. But now I realize that this is what has to happen. Too bad, I guess. Too bad it's just a little too late. Too bad it's far too late. I suppose I've finally chosen my side. Gobber's wrong, though, I can't fathom anyone standing behind me after this.

If anyone were to ask, not that I think they would, but I imagine that I'd probably say blue. It hasn't always been blue, though. When I was little it used to be yellow. For a while it was just plain grey, but then I eventually opted towards blue. A small, minuscule part of my brain might think green, but that's absolutely absurd and I'd never say that. However, I can say one thing; it's never, ever been red.

Red is justâ€¦ not my thing. Maybe someday, but I can't see it. Red itself isn't so bad, it's the things that are red that are. And when all I can see is red, it really is quite sickening.

My world is red. That's all there is to it. I'm not entirely sure as my head is still spinning and there's too much noise that I can't even hear myself think, but all I know is that I'm curled up against the wall simply trying to block everything with my eyes glued to all

the red.

Maybe it's the red of the flames engulfing most of the arena. Maybe it's the red of the giant Dragon's scaly features. Mostly, though, I think it's the red of the Nightmare's blood on my hands.

\_â€|Time's up.\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>What did I do?! Okay, wow, sorry that ended up being way, like, over the top dramatic, but I kind of liked how it turned out. Hope you do, too! Sorry that I missed last week's day as well, and that this is a day early, but I want to have tomorrow to get a good start on another chapter of my other story, so thanks for bearing with me. I kind of ended it there not only to frustrate you all, but also so that I'll be mad at myself to write another chapter by next week.<strong>

\*\*If you guys are confused, that's okay, you're supposed to be. And if you aren't; good for you for being observant and calculating! It should be fairly easy to piece together what happened but if not, just wait. I'm sure you weren't expecting this, though... Although, who knows? Maybe you were. Who can really tell?\*\*

\*\*Anywho, thanks again and though I know I've been gone for a long time, thoughts and comments are really encouraged! And because I've been gone for two weeks, I promise to answer all of the ones who are not guests and have an active PM account! See you next update!\*\*

## 18. How To Get Exiled

Of course I've never really thought about it before, but drowning would be a pretty awful way to go. Just think about it, the body's natural reflex is to keep breathing, even when you're holding your breath. When there literally is nothing there to take in, you're left to suffocate a slow and painful death. That's kind of how I feel now, only the suffocation is in my mind, and the water surrounding me is no more than a sea of Vikings.

Air. I need air. I need more than just a million voices screaming at me at once, calling out my victory and conveniently leaving the bloody carcass in full view. I can't help but stare at it. I did that. Me.

\_This is what you wanted, \_I tell myself, but I know that it isn't. Not anymore. But it's too late, my time is up. I don't want this. I don't want to think myself a killer, to know that there are innocent creatures out there who could have gone through the same things I did and I mercilessly slaughtered them. Gods, I sound so un-Astrid. Astrid is a tough warrior who loves fighting, who loves proving herself to a whole audience and doesn't care what anyone else thinks. Who is this girl who is falling to the floor with her hand covering her mouth in part horror and part disgust, wanting to retch what little contents there are in her stomach to mix in with all the blood? I don't even know who I am, but it's not Astrid Hofferson.

And the cheers just keep coming. They don't stop and I can't hear anyone talking, more like incoherent shrieks every now and then cheering me on, cheering the death of a creature so weakened by our own hands. Vikings may be ruthless but they are not dishonorable. At least, I don't think so. No, actually, I'm not even sure anymore. I just want this to be over, not caring how just that it happens sometime soon. My head is pounding and even the hallucinations have left. The Nightmare doesn't flicker black or white or purple or blue, it just remains a mangled, bloody mess, sending me a message of this is what I did.

I suck in a breath but no air comes into my lungs. I've never had a problem with swimming so I don't actually know, but I imagine that drowning would feel an awful lot like this. No air, no one to help me. No one has even noticed that anything's amiss. I can't help but be stricken with the realization that they don't know me. None of them know me, nor have they ever. I can't really blame them, though, after all, how are they supposed to know the real me when I don't even know who that is, myself? All I know is that I can't be a Viking. Not after this.

My shoulders rack with a fit of...something. It's not tears, Astrid Hofferson doesn't cry, but it's not quite grief, either. It's just...loss. Yes, that sounds correct. Loss. Loss of all that once was home, loss of who I am, loss of what it means to be human. We all thought that they were the mindless beasts. How ironic as we were all simply looking in a mirror.

All I can do is wait. And wait some more. The roars aren't dying down and I squeeze my eyes shut, trying not to feel so helplessly distressed. I am a warrior. I can handle this. I can't handle this. I am hopelessly distressed. I'm the monster, me, not Valka, not Asmund, not Hiccup. All I do is take and take and take and it's so selfish. I don't care if I am a Viking, because what does that even mean anymore? I don't know. All I do know is that this is not me and I have absolutely no clue on what to do. I want to scream, I want to hit something, I want to run. Run, yes, that sounds nice. Or better yet, \_flying. \_I want to be like Hiccup and fly away from all my troubles. But Hiccup is just as grounded as I am, all because of me. I keep expecting my arms to feel something short of irritation, but the Dragon Queen must have pushed it away for good because I don't feel anything. And in my time of need, too. I'd happily spread a Deadly Nadder's wings and soar off into the unknown, never to be seen again.

For the first time in my entire apocryphal existence, I just want someone to save me. It's always been me and me alone, but all I want is someone to swoop in and save me. Maybe even end me, right now, I'm not too finicky. End. End already. Save me, please.

I open my eyes and suck in a breath, only to squeeze them back shut when I see the Monstrous Nightmare's limp body dead on the cold arena floor. This is my fate, to be a traitor to my people and side with the Dragons. I quiver, either from the cold or from the fear that \_this is really happening, \_I can't say.

All of a sudden, something inside me snaps. I don't know what it is. Nothing...strange happens. Nothing out of the ordinary, but I suddenly just feel...different. Not the same. Maybe even less empty, who can tell? Something inside me breaks, but not in a bad way.

Something's different, and now, I can just see a glimmer of hope. I don't know where it comes from, but something inside me stirs and recognizes this new being, welcoming it, even. My eyes snap open and a name gracelessly falls from my lips: "Hiccup."

I hear him before I see him. That awful, terrible, piercing cry- the only warning to a deadly shot of pure plasma that there is no escaping from. I think when the first Viking screams, everything goes from celebration to panic. Different exclamations of "Night Fury!" and "Get down!" ring throughout the arena, even through the midst of screaming and trampling feet. It's a miracle I don't get stepped all over like a rug, but I can't do anything more than stare at the Nightmare- the dead Nightmare.

"Astrid?" someone shakes my shoulder and the world slowly sharpens into focus. Very slowly, though. "Astrid? Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"H-H-Hiccup," I croak, blinking in shock. What's he doing here?

"Gods there's so much blood, what happened?" his forest green Dragon eyes bore into my blue human ones, looking so concerned and full of truth. I can't meet them. It's been so long since I last saw him, I realize. His ruffled, auburn brown hair, his freckled face, his jet black scaled wings...his black, black tail that is scarred beyond repair.

My eyes widen and I slowly scramble backwards, desperate for him to get away from me, no, to get \_me \_away from \_him.\_ "D-don't come any closer!" I shout.

"Astrid, stop-"

"Hiccup, you have to leave! How did you even get out of the cove? No, that doesn't matter, go, get out of here!" I demand, shaking my head as if that'll make things any less real.

"No, I'm not leaving you here," he says defiantly, taking a step closer to me. I can see the Vikings around me leaping forwards, ready to catch the Night Fury in the flesh for the first time. And it'll be all my fault.

"Hiccup, get out of here!" I shriek, but to no avail. I scream as the first Viking attacks him, but they don't stand a chance against a Dragon who is protecting something. One by one, or four by four, Hiccup takes them down with skills and abilities I've never even thought of before, that's how good he is. He doesn't even use his plasma blasts but I can't focus because there's just too much going on. But oh gods, he doesn't know. He doesn't know what I've done. He doesn't know that this is what is happening, it's real and it's a nightmare.

Suddenly, he stops dead in his tracks, finally spying the dead body of the Dragon. His wings slouch down in utter disbelief and I can see his mouth form a quick 'O' shape, his eyes widening. He has just enough time to slowly turn to me, meeting my eyes and confirming his thoughts with one look at my ashamed face. Now he knows. And now he doesn't even have the time or the power to fight back as the best of the best, Stoick the Vast, tackles him to the ground and pins him

face down, but the Night Fury doesn't even fight back. Oh man, I've screwed up big time.

Seeing Hiccup down and defenseless finally snaps me out of my daze, and I jump to my feet, sprinting at Stoick crying, "Don't hurt him!"

Someone, I don't even know who, stops me and though I fight tooth and nail to drive them away I just don't have the mental power to get away. Chief Stoick's eyes harden and they send shivers down my spine as he slowly pieces things together. I stop fighting against the Viking holding me back and stand still, staring into his eyes and refusing to back down. If I'm going down I might as well keep some of my pride. Besides, this is what he deserves; his own son is right in front of his eyes and even if he knew who Hiccup was, he wouldn't hesitate to kill him. He wouldn't think twice because it's what Vikings do.

"Put it with the others," he spits as several other Vikings wrestle Hiccup to a standing position, forcing him to walk out with them and looking as dejected as dejected can be. I choke back a hot, sticky feeling in my throat and look back at Stoick. He sends me daggers and motions to me. "You," he says coldly, "come with me."

I gulp but I don't show fear because even if I'm being very un-me, Astrid Hofferson \_never \_shows fear. That's the one thing that has never changed, nor will it ever.

Unfortunately, that doesn't mean I still can't get thrown into the Great Hall like a rag doll, helplessly falling to my knees and struggling to stand before my chief- er, the chief. I sincerely doubt I'll be able to ever call him my chief after this stunt. I've never even really talked to him before now and I can't help but feel just the slightest bit intimidated. Okay, fine, a lot. But I don't beg for mercy, no, I'm not that low.

"You \_traitor,\_" he begins, hissing the word out with a disgusted scowl. "You \_liar, \_you \_disgrace, \_you- you...\_Dragon lover!\_"

I wince at the last one. That has always been the lowest of all insults and it still stings.

"Was it all just a trick? A foolery of us all so you could have your way in? That was why you were acting so weird after the fight, isn't it? Because you felt \_ashamed \_that you killed a Dragon!" he roars, gesturing wildly with his hands and making me take a step back with each accented articulation. "Are you even still one of us? Or are you beyond all reason? Are you Bonding, a new type of spy? Just how long did you think you could keep this up?"

I don't say anything. What has he ever done for me to deserve the truth? I wear a stony and guarded expression, trying not to let on about how much each word slams itself upon me like a whip. I'm sure he notices, barely anything gets past the chief.

"They've killed- \_hundreds of us! \_Don't you understand that? How dare you walk around the village like you're one of us, how dare you make it to the finals and steal some other Viking's first kill just so you can be a spy, how \_dare \_you be worried for a goddamn \_Dragon \_and not the people you could have \_killed!\_"

"He was just protecting me," I immediately defend. I no longer need to watch my tongue or respect, this is where it all ends and from here on out, wherever this leads, I'm not going to go down like this. "He wouldn't have hurt anyone, and you don't know what you're talking about-"

"I don't know what I'm talking about? You're just a stupid \_girl \_blinded by the hope that she won't have to kill a Dragon!"

>"<em>Excuse me, <em>but did you \_not \_just watch me slaughter an innocent Dragon out there?" I demand evenly, though his comment makes my blood boil. I can't help but feel just the tiniest bit proud of myself. Here I am, little Astrid Hofferson, ready to get exiled or executed, and I dare have the courage to talk back to Chief Stoick the Vast.

"That still doesn't change the fact that a Dragon- the blasted Night Fury, of all beasts- came and 'rescued' you, and you talked to it, about it, like it had a mind! Like it was more than just a pest that we have to worry about!"

"Because they are," I argue. "They \_are \_more than mindless beasts! He can \_talk, \_he can \_understand me, \_and he's- they're- different. Sooner or later, Stoick, you're going to learn that we can't run from the Dragons. We have to learn from them because if we run, we can't escape them."

He scoffs at me, staring down with either disgust or pity, possibly/probably both. "Spoken like a true Dragon lover," he spits at me.

"It's true! And maybe you won't believe me because I have given you no proof to back my case, but it's true. You \_have \_to see, or else it'll be too late."

"Don't you turn this around and make it seem like \_I'm \_the ignorant one here, young lady," he jabbed his finger in my face, making me stop. "This isn't about me, or the tribe, or anyone else. This is about you and that Dragon. Now, I make myself clear when I say that you are no longer welcome among us, and you're lucky that you were good in your time and that I don't lop your head off where you stand. Know right now, if you ever so much as \_look \_in the direction of Berk \_ever \_again, anyone has full rights to kill you with no mercy."

I hold my chin up and try not to allow my lower lip to tremble as my whole life's aspirations sis thrown into the sea. "They're not what we think they are," I choke out.

He roars out, grabbing the nearest weapon and hurling it across the room. Very Viking-like. "Damn what \_you \_think they are! I \_know \_that Dragons are \_exactly \_what we think they are! They don't think, it's all in your head! That Dragon can't speak, they don't remember any of their past lives, they don't remember their loved ones, their tribe, their people, they don't remember \_anything. \_They leave! I know because Dragons took \_everything \_from me! Everything! I don't have a single thing left, I am all alone! Dragons don't have minds, they are soulless creatures who don't care what they do to hurt others. You think you're so right? You are just a stupid little girl,

you don't know \_anything \_about what this is truly like, what it's like to have absolutely \_everything \_taken from you in the claws of a beast!"

My face turns red and he finally pushes me over the top. I don't even pause to marvel at how such a strong character like himself mentioned such a weak, emotional aspect of his life in front of me. That was crossing the line.

"How \_dare \_you!" I scream, fighting back tears of pure anger. "How \_dare \_you go on and tell me about everything you've lost and how you have no one left and are all alone! Not only is that just plain and simple life but how \_dare \_you tell me I know nothing of being alone! How about when I was a baby and my parents were \_carried off by Dragons? \_How about when my \_last living relative Bonded? \_What about when each and every one of them \_left me alone? \_And what was the cause of all of them? \_Dragons, that's what. \_Don't you dare tell me that I know nothing of it. Out of the two of us, \_I \_am the one who is truly alone. So if I can get past all my customs and bad past and get my head out of my arse, then maybe there's hope for the rest of Viking kind, but I doubt it. You are the spitting image of a Viking and you're too pigheaded to realize that maybe you were \_wrong. \_Have you ever thought about \_why \_they raid us? It's not their fault, they're being...controlled, or something, and they don't hate Vikings. It's very possible for them to remember their past-"

"Hold on a second, they're being controlled? By what?"

"Yes, there's this giant...presenceâ€|. that rules a monarchy from-"

"From?" he leans down close, everything else I just said flying completely over his head. "So you've been to the nestâ€|?"

"What? No- yes, I mean, no, but, no, it's- not something anyone can find- only- only a Dragon can find it," I stammer, stumbling back from him once again. He straightens, a gleam in his eye that I don't like. Oh no. He can't beâ€|. "Oh, no, Stoick, you don't want to, it's not something you can fight against, please, trust me! You \_can't \_lead thousands of people to their deaths!"

He ignores me as he shrugs me off and starts stalking off to the boats. I don't care that I just said things to a \_chief- \_of all people- that I wouldn't even think in my own mind, I have to get ths through to him.

"Please, listen to me! You don't understand, it's not something you can fight, believe me! You physically \_won't \_be able to, it's your missing wi-"

He pushes me down, glaring at me as if I'm vermin simply for trying to grab his arm and stop him. "I don't want to hear \_anything \_from you. Maybe I was wrong, maybe you do know a thing or two about being alone, but you are a fool for trusting any kind of Dragon. You better not be here when I get back."

With that, he leaves, slamming the doors behind him. I hear him shout out across the village in a loud, booming voice that leaves me quaking in my boots. "Ready the ships!"

No. No, this can't be happening. I suck in a breath and stumble a step or two to the side as I try to process what in Odin's name is going on. Stoick is going to lead all the Vikings that go with him to their deaths. Valka's too strong, and Stoick literally won't be able to fight her. Whatever happens, it's not going to end good, and I don't want thousands of people to die. Besides, I have a feeling I know exactly why Hiccup won't be beheaded anytime soon.

This can't be how it all ends, it just can't. But I'm afraid we're all out of luck, because I have absolutely no idea what I'm supposed to do.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Not even joking, this is as far as we can come with what I have without making the chapter extremely long. I was actually surprised with how long those simple things turned out to be. So, Hiccup finally comes back, but I kind of skiffed you all off because he has such a minor role. If you're upset with the way he's reintroduced, please keep in mind that this is from Astrid's POV and everything was in a haze for her. Okay, so I think that's it for now. Thanks for reading, see you all next time!<strong>

## 19. How To Do Something Crazy

**\*\*If you are following the last chapter's instructions, you have begun at the right chapter.\*\***

\* \* \*

><p>I don't think Chief Stoick honestly cares whether or not I'm still here. I don't think he cares that I'm standing above on the rafters of the docks, watching him load everyone to their deaths and putting on my bravest face. He doesn't see me, nor does he care. I convince myself that they're not my problem, but just because I have decided that I can't kill Dragons doesn't mean that I have completely given up on my Viking ways. This is still my tribe, and these are still my people...and nothing about this is changing in the fact that none of them will survive if they leave. But it's not my place to tell them anymore. And even if it were, would they even listen?<p>

It nearly breaks me when a group of Vikings pull Hiccup onto a boat. He looks so defeated and sad that I can't help but weaken at the knees for him. He seems so terrified. Chains adorn his neck like necklaces and his wings are strapped shut to his back. His hair hangs limply in his eyes from being continuously doused with seawater (a wet Dragon head can't fire—don't ask me why, I think it has something to do with Ancestral Dragons). His hands are tied behind him just below his wings with a long chain leash. I helplessly watch as they unceremoniously tie him to the mast of the ship, wrapping the chain leash around the pole and pulling tight, causing him to stumble and fall to his knees. The only body part on him that is free is his tail and that is forced to coil around the mast for support as he's never been on a ship before.

There's something so terribly wrong about seeing not just a Dragon, but Hiccup, chained and defeated like this. He doesn't belong with these Vikings. He needs to be free, flying through the skies. But



even if he tried to break free he wouldn't be able to leave. I still have his prosthetic.

"I'm sorry," I cry out feebly. But there's nothing I can do. I've been disowned, banished. I no longer have a home. I don't belong among these Vikings either. And that crushes me.

It doesn't take long for the Vikings' strong sails to carry them far away from me and my post, leaving me helpless to do anything but stare at the horizon they have disappeared on. Hiccup will probably die, and even if he miraculously survives the attack, there's no way they'll ever let him go. He's a prize now, they'll want his heart on a stake the moment he is no longer of use to them. I sigh and turn around to fall against the cliff face in despair. I lean my head against the hard rock behind me. I will \_not \_cry. I am stronger than this. I chose my path, there's no going back now, I will not cryâ€|

Something wet slides down my cheek.

Dammit.

I can't help it, though. Who am I kidding? I've lost everything. And I don't even have the one person- er, Dragon, who would help me through it all. He's gone now and it's all my fault. All of this is my fault. If only I had killed that dreaded Night Fury in the woods like I was supposed to. It would have been better for everyone. I sniff and angrily wipe away the fresh tears freely falling down my face now. I can taste the salt in my mouth but I'm so angry, hopeless, and confused that I can't even worry about the liquid weakness pouring from my eyes. Gods I hate my life. Why did I have to Bond? Why did all of this have to happen to me?

And why do I have to go through it alone?

My back slowly slides down the cliff face until my butt hits the wooden deck and I curl my arms my head resting on my knees and \_cry. \_I hate that it feels good. I hate that the burning sensation clogging my nose and eyes is actually satisfactory, but most of all I hate that I want someone to comfort me. I'm \_Astrid Hofferson, \_I don't need \_anyone \_to \_comfort \_me. I don't need anyone, \_period. \_Well, Astrid Hofferson doesn't need anyone, but I'm not even sure who that is anymore, if I am still even her. It seems like such a long lifetime ago.

Who am I? I'm a traitor. I'm a Dragon lover. I'm a disgrace. I'm weak.

But above all else, I'm alone.

My specialty, right? I drive everyone away, I guess I can't blame them. I've really done it now, though. This is all my fault. And that alone makes me cry \_harder \_and I \_hate \_it.

I jump to a standing position when I hear something heavy \_thud \_to a stop right in front of me. Immediately, my instincts come in and I reach for my ax, ready to chop off their head. I pause moments before swinging when I realize that it's a Dragon. And not just any Dragonâ€|

"Asmund?" I ask in astonishment.

He looks quite happy to see me. "A-A-Astri-id, A-Asm-mund fou-nd y-y-you!"

"You sure did," I say, breathing out. "Um, what- what are you...doing here?"

He cocks his head at me. "D-d-do-ing h-h-ere?"

"Yeah," I sniff, darting my eyes to the side and jerkily wiping any remainders of tears from my eyes. "Why are you here?"

He purses his chapped lips, shaking out his wings. "Asmund he-r-re," he states plainly.

"But- wait, what? I released you from your debt, you don't owe me anything," I tell him. "You paid it off."

"N-ne-ver ow-ed A-As-trid any-th-thing."

"Huh?" I say smartly.

"W-why waâ€| wa-t-terâ€|?"

"What are you talking about?" I quickly sound out the words in my head. Um, water? Yeah, they took Hiccup away- "Oh. No, no, no, I'm fine. Water coming out the eyes is, um, normalâ€|?"

He doesn't look convinced, but I never said I'm any good at lying. Okay, fine, so I actually am a good liar. I kept it up until the very end, right? I guess there was just no one to really be looking for lies, so I never had to worry about it.

Wow, now I'm really starting to sound like a downer. Starting to? Oh, screw it, I can be down all I want, I've lost everything, whether I like it or not.

"As-tri-rid m-mu-st go."

"Go? Go where?" He gives me a blank stare with his head cocked to the side before rustling his wings and slowly gesturing to the horizon. What is he playing atâ€|? Oh, no. No, I can't, there's no way. "No, Asmund. I can't. What's the point? I can't do anything. I'm not a Viking, and I'm not a Dragon anymore. The Queen repelled me, see?"

I unwrap my bondings briefly to show him my arms, the ones with the singular blue scale on the inside of my wrists that Stoick thankfully never saw. The two scales are hard, solid in color, but they don't feel like anything. I don't have any bad feeling from them, I've never had anything for the past couple days. No fire incidents, no scale incidents, no unexplained sympathy towards the Dragons, other than from what I already know. I sympathized \_for \_them, but not with them, as I sometimes had before. But I will deny it if anyone asks. I quickly rewrap them and look away.

"N-n-no-t t-tr-ue," Asmund croons. Stepping over to stand right in front of me. I still can't believe he's here.

"Yeah, it is. I am so, so stupid. I actually thought I could pull all

this off. The lying, that is. I actually thought that I could be a Viking without having to be a Dragon when I was already Bonding- or, uh, Turning. There was no hope, and besides; apparently, according to Valka, we're all Dragons, some of our souls are just more Draconic compared to others'." I explain bitterly, once again sliding down the wall and resting my head on my knees, allowing my bangs to fall in my face without a care. What is really the point, anyways? I'll just loose. Maybe even get myself killed.

"A-Asm-und b-b-e A-As-trid's w-wing-gs," he stutters, looking prideful at his completion.

I just stare at him. "Asmund," I begin, "you don't understand. I can't \_do \_anything. I have nothing special to fight against anyone- I can't take on the Dragon Queen and worry about a whole Viking armada as well."

"As-tri-rid n-no-ot...a-lon-ne," he squawks, flapping his wings once, twice, three times and scraping his spiked tail across the wooden deck. "M-ust f-ight. Mu-st s-sa-ve A-smund a-nd H-Hic-Hic-u-up."

I jerk my head up at that.

"Did you just say 'Hiccup'?" I ask slowly. How does he know who Hiccup is? Actually, never mind. There are some things that I think I'm better off not knowing.

He squawks once again and I take that as a yes. Save Hiccup? It's not possible. Besides, he must hate me now for what I've done. I'm a Dragon lover, and yet I'm also a Dragon killer. How does this work in Stoick's eyes? What does he see? He thinks I've sided with the Dragons, and maybe I have, all I know is that I can no longer be a Viking, but I successfully killed the Nightmare. I'm not proud of it, nor am I happy about it, but I did kill a Dragon. How does label me as such a dishonest term? I fear I don't know, but of one thing I am certain: there is nowhere I belong.

"I can't save Hiccup," I whisper, folding my arms around my legs and placing my chin on them. "I can't even save myself."

"S-sa-ved A-A-smund," he points out. I snort.

"That was just kindness. Here's the thing, Dragon- I didn't really save you. I just let you free, okay? I didn't save you, I can't save anyone, and I'm not a hero."

"B-but H-Hic-"

"Hiccup is better off without me!" I shout, standing once again so that I can glare at Asmund's golden eyes with my own blue. "In fact, this whole world is better off without me! I'm just a screw up, I can't do anything right, and all of these crazy, stupid ideas running around in my head won't save any us. I'm just...weak."

By the gods it pains me to say that. But, it's true. I am weak. I can't hold it in me to do what my whole life has been training for, I can't keep one secret, I can't bring a knife down to end one in a thousand others' lives, I can't do a lot of things. All along, I've never been strong. I've been deceiving everyone, even myself. A fresh batch of tears threatens to leak out of my eyes but I'm done crying.

I may be weak, but I can face this. What's another tragedy in my life?

Besides, Hiccup is better off without me. At least maybe the Vikings will give him a quick death, the one he deserved the very first time we met instead of this long and grueling torture. Dragons belong in the air, not the ground, and I can only help him out for so long before something goes wrong. We were never meant to meet, our worlds never supposed to collide, and yet we did- they did. Look where it ended up for both of us, though.

Some small part of me still clings to some hope. Some small part of me wishes that it won't be over here, that the story will continue on. That part of me doesn't mind that I'm a Dragon, maybe even misses my scales because it gives me some connection with \_them. \_That part of me misses the times with Hiccup spent happy, an emotion I hadn't felt in practically forever. That part of me wouldn't mind kissing him again if it meant I could have him back. But it's only a small part, and besides, hope is a weapon I don't know how to use.

"D-don't gi-v-ve u-up," Asmund pleads. "C-ca-n't g-gi-ve up."

"And why not?" I demand, spinning around to stalk away, leaving him standing there with no response, but he catches me off guard.

"Theyâ€| willâ€| die," he says, slowly shaping the words on his tongue and for the first time in forever, articulating a phrase- however short it may be- perfectly. Not one word did he stutter.

It takes me a second to realize he's talking about all the Dragons. Asmund is here, pleading with me to save them. But I can't help them. I really, really wish I could, but it's too late, far, far too late.

"I-I'm sorry," I say, furrowing my brow and crossing my arms, hunching my shoulders self consciously in a foreign feeling I associate with as hopelessness, "but I justâ€|"

"J-j-us-st w-wha-at?" he demands.

"Can't," I finish weakly, stepping down and turning my back to him. "So, this is me, Asmund. This is Astrid Hofferson. I'm not the Viking I thought I was. I'm not the hero everyone wants me to be. I'm just a girl and I don't know where I belong."

"A-Asm-und's jus-s-t a-a D-Dra-gon, b-but h-he h-h-a-as p-ur-pose."

I close my eyes and hug my arms to myself. That's good for him, really, it is, butâ€|

"B-beca-ause o-f A-As-trid," he says.

I open my eyes and turn around to look at him.

"W-why didn't A-Astrid k-kill b-bla-ck Drag-on? Wh-y d-did A-As-trid f-fr-ee A-As-mund?"

"I don't know," I lie, really wishing he would just drop it. Why is this so important? Doesn't he know that I literally can't do anything?

"W-why di-dn't A-stri-id k-k-ill Dra-g-gons?"

"I did!" I shout, spinning around. "I did kill a Dragon, okay? And even then, it wasn't enough. I've got blood on my hands and it still \_isn't enough.\_" My breath escapes me and I take a step back, feeling tears peak at my eyes once more. I choke back a sob and force them back into oblivion where they belong.

"S-s-soâ€|?"

I sigh and avert my eyes. "It could have been me."

"S-s-o-rr-y-y?" he asks, cocking his head in that birdlike way.

"I didn't kill you guys because, in both situations; it could have been me. \_I \_could have been the one shot down, \_I \_could have been the one imprisoned in the arena. I don't know, I was losing my mind at that point, and I just felt \_sorry. \_Not for you, but with you. I was even sympathizing with the Dragons I was fighting in Training and when it was just me, I couldn't do it."

I know that this was the reason that I had set Asmund free, but I hadn't really known why I hadn't killed Hiccup. I didn't really realize that the reasons were one in the same until now.

"C-c-cou-ld b-be H-H-i-cup r-r-ight n-no-ow-w."

"Yeah. I could be."

"So-o?"

I turn my back once more. I have two options; I can stay here and continue on, finding some way to survive on my own, or I can go and probably die in attempt to save a Dragon who's been my enemy for my entire life. Why does it always have to come between me and a Dragon? I once said that no matter what, I would always choose me. I wouldn't risk my life for a Dragon I barely knew. I wouldn't risk my life for a Dragon, period.

\_It could be you, \_Asmund had told me, more or less.

In one split second, I make my decision; I won't risk my life for a Dragon.

"Come on, Asmund, we've got some Dragons to free," I say, running off without checking to see if he's following. I hear him croon happily, taking to the air and soaring above me. As I run, I feel something latch onto my arm and swipe me off of the docks and into the air. Asmund tosses me into the air and I land on his back. He knows where the arena is, but he isn't afraid. I should really stop underestimating this Dragon.

"T-thou-ght w-wou-ldn't r-r-risk l-l-life f-or D-D-Dragon?" he asks, smiling up at me.

"Don't make me change my mind," I snap, keeping my eyes set on the

arena. "And I'm not. I'm risking my life for a friend."

\* \* \*

><p>Asmund disappeared once we landed and I'm not entirely sure where he's gone off to, but I can't blame him. There are quite a few unpleasant memories in here for him.<p>

The first thing I do is run through the arena, cutting the ropes and chains and opening every gate inside the arena. I really hope this works, and if it doesn't, well, I'm probably going to die, anyways. Once I stop, everything is silent for one second, then two, then three. I practically hold my breath, but there's no explosion or anything. In fact, when nothing comes out of the cages, it leaves me wondering if they're even there.

The Zipplebacks' are the ones who first poke their heads out, blinking in the light of the sun. The female Gronkle grumbles slowly, as if she can't believe there isn't an audience or a group of children. There's a Dragon whom I didn't even realize was kept in here; a Terrible Terror. He's extremely scrawny and considerably younger than the rest of the Dragons, a child, even. His wings are short and bright yellow with orange accents and his nose is crooked and turned up, resembling a skin and bone form of a horn spouting from his face. Two curved dark horns come out of his black head and smoke curls up from his fingertips, showing off the minor hints of the Stoker Class Dragon he is.

I make a mental note of how small a group this is. I feel something inside me twist with a sickening feeling when I realize that this is really all that's left. A Deadly Nadder, now free, is gone, the Monstrous Nightmare, never to return, is forever gone, and now there's this ragtag group of I don't really know what, here with the responsibility of saving the Vikings' butts. Great.

"E-excuse me?" I call out, all of the Dragons' heads snapping towards me with their eyes slit dangerously. "Uh!" I start, backing up a few steps. I may be brave but I'm not stupid. I don't have a weapon, I had left my ax on the docks, and I'm not threatening enough to a group of three- well, four- Dragons. Even the little one could probably hold his own against me without a weapon. He might not kill me, but he'd certainly hold his own.

I take a deep breath. This is my only chance. For Hiccup.

"Okay, look, I don't know if you can talk, I don't even know if you can understand me, but I need your help. I know you have no reason to listen to me, but please," they growl at me and all take a step forward. "You all have been kept prisoner for a long time, but I really need your help. Not just me, either, um, my friend Hiccup, he's a- er, the Night Fury, and some people are going to attack the Dragon Queen and they need-

The Gronkle snaps at me and I cringe back. I don't want to get my arm bitten off.

"I think you can hear me, I'm really hoping that you decide to help me. I don't want a fight and I'm not really in a condition to fight, so could you please maybe shut the hell up."

The Terrible Terror kid is actually the one to lunge first and I have one second to realize how much this \_sucks \_that I'm going to get mauled by a Terror \_child \_before I instinctively raise my hands to cover my face, preparing for the strike, and-

A growl, screech, and blast of fire flashes before my eyes and the Terror is sent tumbling away. To my surprise, Asmund comes flying in, zipping down in front of me and spreading his wings wide, blocking me and snarling at the other Dragons. Recognizing a protective Dragon, they immediately step back, albeit with a few growling protests.

"F-f-frie-nds d-d-o n-o-t-t h-ha-arm A-Astri-id," he snaps.

"Asmund," I say happily and a little astonished, lowering my hands and walking up beside him. "You're still here."

"As-tri-id's p-p-protector," he grins back at me. Then, he turns his spikes, making them stand on end dangerously, or, should I say threateningly. He snaps and squawks several times, and the Dragons suddenly perk up. Somehow, I recognize that he's explaining my situation. I don't understand the words he actually says, but I can understand what he's telling them.

"Are they going to help us?" I can't help but ask.

"I-I'm n-not su-r-re," he admits, looking fretful.

"Not sure? What? Why exactly aren't they sure? We can't just leave them here," I say as the Gronkle snaps at the little Terror, who responds by firing a stream of molten lava from his tiny little hands, and excessive amount of smoke curling from them.

Asmund twists his mouth, his spikes clicking together. "S-some a-are no-ot c-com-comâ€¦ e-easy wor-k-king wi-th-th th-em."

"Them?"

A shaky wing gesture and a nod are all I have to go on and I turn my head. In the entrance to one of the cagesâ€¦are the other teens?

"Them?" I repeat in astonishment.

He croons and jumps in the air, soaring down to the exit to meet them. Ruffnut and Tuffnut are the first to come out, jeering and laughing together, but what surprises me the most is when they throw themselves on each of Asmund's shoulders and happily exclaim in their raspy voices, "Asmund! Long time, no see! What are you up to- whoa, Astrid?"

Not even joking, they say it in unison, too. They're twins, but normally they're not this in sync.

"Um, what are you doing here?" I ask warily.

"The Dragon here said we needed to help and- oh dear gods, the Dragons are all out! I knew this was a trap!" Fishlegs lets out an undignified squeal and races back to the exit, but something \_thumps! \_to the ground and Asmund is there, politely flashing his teeth and large wings as he blocks the exit. Ruffnut and Tuffnut are

unceremoniously heaped in a pile from when Asmund dumped them on the ground to cut off the large Viking teen's escape.

"Okay, um, I'll just- I'll just stay then," he stammers nervously, keeping his hands protectively underneath his chin, not that that would help anything whatsoever.

"Uh, hey guys?" Snotlout pipes up from the corner but I ignore him.

"How are they going to help?" I ask. "They don't know the first thing about Dragons. And wait, where's Eret?"

"He got to get to go with the Vikings to attack the nest," Ruffnut sighs dramatically with an expression that readsâ€| lovesick? First of all, ew, and second of all, \_Eret \_had gone? "And sure we do," she adds before suddenly getting distracted and messing with her dirt-caked fingernails.

"Guys?"

"Yeah, we might as well help you, it's probably any day now that we'll get banished, go down in flames or nothing at all, right?" Tuffnut cuts in.

"What? Banished? Why? You guys can't be that stupid," I exclaim. They've done some pretty stupid stuff, but nothing that would make Chief Stoick banish themâ€|

"We can't show you."

"Or tell you."

"Our mother swore us to never tell this to anyone else. Ever. Like, it's the most secret-est secret-y thing you could ever have in the entire universe," I raise my eyebrow at his word choice but I refrain from interrupting. Maybe they'll actually have something important to say. He is rather grave about the whole thing. "Before she Turned that night, she said; Ruffnut, Tuffnut, I want you to know that Tuffnut was always my favorite-"

"That's not what she said, you mutton-headed idiot!" Ruffnut cuts him off by dragging him face first into the dirt.

Yep, so much for 'actually having something important to say'. I guess even I eat my words occasionally.

Ruffnut places her foot on her brother's face to hold him down while he flops around like a fish and, peering down at him, she says, "Besides, it was \_me \_she said was her favorite, duh. But that's not what was the important thing. The important thing was for them to never find out. She always said to have no fear. Why else do you think we plunge off cliffs and punch each other in the face willingly?"

I pause for a moment, frowning. "I don't think that's what she meant when she said to have no fear," I point out, but an unsettling feeling establishes in the pit of stomach. Those words are so familiar, I'm almost positive that I've heard them before.



"Guys!" Snotlout snaps us all out of our moment of silence as we realize that the Terrible Terror has been checking Snotlout out this whole time. His smoking hands are dangerously close to grasping his shirt and I guess he's been backing up around the arena this whole time attempting to scavenge around for a weapon. He finally spies a broken end of a spear and dives to pick it up. The Terror's eyes slit and he growls.

"You'll only make it worse," I say, folding my arms.

"What in Thor's name do I do?" he shouts, reluctantly dropping the tip. Immediately, the little Dragon relaxes.

"Ask it to go away," I say in a bored tone. One Dragon isn't that bad, especially since the others seem to be ignoring him.

"What?" he exclaims.

I roll my eyes. "Amatuer," I mutter as I leap across the arena and in front of the Terror. The little guy's not looking for a fight, now, he isn't threatened by our presence, he's only curious. I jump in front of Snotlout and stare at it in its eyes. "Back off," I demand to the Stoker class species.

He grumbles but waddles off.

I smile satisfactory and walk over to Asmund. "Are they going to help us? Cause we need to get going."

Asmund nods, stepping over to all of the Dragons, snarling and squawking once more. The other Dragons uneasily glance at each other, flickering their forked tongues like serpents. Eventually, they look back to my Deadly Nadder friend and give an assuring nod with their heads. I smile and take it as a yes.

"Remember how you said you were all here to help me?" I address the other teens. "I know I'm no longer a Viking and I know I haven't exactly been the kindest to you all these past years, but I need your help. There's this Dragon Queen who controls the other Dragons and that's why they raid us, and everyone is about to attack her. They will all get themselves killed. And; my friend. He's the Night Fury. We'll need his help, too."

"So, what's the plan?" Fishlegs asks.

I smile. "You know what, Fishlegs? I have absolutely no clue."

\* \* \*

><p>Ruffnut and Tuffnut are going to fly with the two Zipplebacks, who I have found, literally cannot talk for some reason. I guess they've never learned. The female Gronkle will give Fishlegs a ride and she can utter a few words. Her vocabulary is much less literate than Asmund's but she doesn't stammer quite as badly. The Terrible Terror, though small and still a child, is strong enough to fly Snotlout while holding on to him, plus, he seems to have taken a liking to the vain Viking, though it makes said Viking extremely uncomfortable (all the better for the rest of us). I, obviously, am going to catch a ride with Asmund.<p>

As the others prepare for the flight, I approach the twins.

"So, how do you know Asmund?" I ask.

"We met him in the wild," Ruffnut says simply. "He had a name and could speak, we'd never met a Dragon who could speak and didn't try to kill us, so we never told anyone. A pretty funny name, though. How do you know him?"

I bit my lip, pondering the notion of whether to tell them or not. What's the harm, I suppose. "'Asmund' is not a funny name, it was my grandfather's," I eventually snap, figuring that that's enough for them to piece it together.

"Man, what a coincidence, huh?" Tuffnut snorts.

Apparently not, then.

I sigh. "I'm the one who freed him from the ring that night."

"That was \_you?\_" Ruffnut asks, laughing. "Oh man, that was awesome!

"That- was not 'awesome', that was very risky," I argue. "And I was stupid for doing itâ€|" my face slackens as I glance over at Asmund soaring above the arena with the other Dragons, getting them used to being out in the air flying free again. "But I guess stupid's just something we all do. Your mother sounded like a wise woman. I remember her leaving in one of the raids. What was she again?"

"Gronkle," Tuffnut replied.

Oh my godsâ€| I gasp, jumping back.

"What? Was it something I said?" he asks Ruffnut, who shrugs.

I can't believe I didn't realize it before. That's why she seemed familiar, that's why the words were soâ€| Oh my godsâ€|

"Y-your mother's name...didn't happen to be Helga, did it?"

"Yeah, you remember?" Ruffnut says, looking up.

"No. But I met her." I gulp, looking at the twins, who, for the first time, are stunned speechless. "She told me to tell 'them' to have no fear, and that she'd see them soon. I'm almost certain that you guys are who she was talking about. She remembers you guysâ€| Look, I know you said you couldn't tell me and that it was your secret, but if I show you something, could you maybe tell me it? I think it might be something of value to all of us."

"An exchange of secrets? Alright, sure, why not," the twins say after glancing at each other.

I've never actually taken my arm wrappings off in front of another Viking, and I hate how intimidated I feel. I hate feeling scared and helpless in general so I suck in a breath and begin to unwrap them just to show the gods that I'm still strongâ€| hope.

The two blue scales show themselves to the twins and they glance at each other. For a moment, I'm not sure of what they're thinking, but, then again, I'm never quite sure what they're thinking.

"Oh," Tuffnut says, sounding almostâ€¦ bored. I give them a quizzical look.

"That's it?" Ruffnut adds.

"Excuse me?"

"We've known about you changing for a while, that's not a secret!" Ruffnut exclaims in her raspy voice, folding her arms.

"Did you just say you've known about me?" I ask in astonishment. How did they know? I thought I had done such a good job covering it, there's no way they could have been sneaking around following me, I would have known.

"We weren't trailing you," one of them- I'm too confused to register which twin it is- offers, as if reading my mind.

"Then howâ€¦?"

"Dragons have stronger senses than normal Vikings, yeah?" It's Tuffnut who speaks, giving a toothy grin. I still stare at them.

They smile at each other. It's not a smirk or a mischievous one, filled with malice or an idea so obviously dangerous and bad in general. It's a knowing smile, one two people share when they've kept a secret for a long time.

I don't notice them unravelling their own arm wraps until they're holding their own wrists out to me. I can't help but stare down at me.

"You're not the only one who's had to keep a secret."

Two green scales stare back at me, one on each wrist. Their eyes hold a certain sadness of those who know they do not belong, who know that they never will. They reflect my own. I furrow my brow. So this is why they had known and never said anything. I had been far too busy worrying about myself to even think about others, let alone try and scent out another Dragon(s) within Berk. My mouth twists in sympathy and regret. I'd never given them the chance to approach me and talk about it. And even if I had, I'm not too sure what I would have done back then.

Then, the spark of a normal, intelligent being vanishes from their eyes and they return to their constantly glazed over appearance. I begin to wonder if the stupidity is even real, at all. Maybe a russe to throw people's opinions off. 'There goes the Thorsten twins, what kind of trouble are they getting into now?'

They grin, cackling madly and run full speed at each other, knocking their helmets together with a sickening crunch.

Or maybe not.

"A-A-strid? Re-ea-dy?" Asmund comes walking up to me with his head tilted to the side.

"Give me a minute," I hop up, suddenly remembering what I had forgotten, immediately beginning to run. I can't afford to think too much on the twins' predicament. I have far too many troubles at the moment.

"Wait, where are you going?" they call.

I smile to myself, turning around to reply, "I've got to grab something."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Sorry the boring chapter was so long, I really tried to condense it. Next chapter, actual action, finally! Also, sorry for the really late updates, thanks for all the support though! I hope this was satisfactory- oh, wait, no it wasn't. It wasn't supposed to be. It was just a suspense chapterâ€| Well then, double sorry. I just needed all the elements in here and I tried to do it as short I could without dragging it on and this is what happened. Alright, see you next time, I'll try to have the next one by Wednesday cause I've been so late.<strong>

## 20. How To (Nearly) Drown

Okay, I admit, I take it back. When I imagined that being in a sea of Vikings must be a lot like drowning, it sort of was for that moment in time. However, nothing compares to this awful and hopeless feeling of actually drowning.

My lungs scream for air but I'm too weak and the surface is too far away. Ironical, that this is the way I'll go. Not in glory, but saving some stupid half reptile who probably won't ever forgive me from the same insufferable fate. It's not like anyone will ever tell you these important things to know, like what it feels like to drown. Not only is it dreadfully and terribly \_awful \_it just plain \_hurts, \_and the pain is something I had not expected. This cove is a lot deeper than I previously expected and, unfortunately, I don't have the same lung capacity as a reptile. But that's besides the point, the real point is that I'm \_drowning \_and I'm not even going to get a chance to see the ending and do you have any idea how much that \_sucks? \_I mean, think about it; I go through all this trouble, I betray my tribe, I risk my life coming out here once again and I don't even die by the hands- I mean, claws- of the main enemy? How freaking embarrassing. Gods, I thought I was better than that. And I'm not even that bad of a swimmer!

I'll be honest, I don't really want to die. The concept of the whole 'eternal sleep' thing intimidates me a bit, though I won't admit it. There has to be something after you die and I refuse to accept that there isn't, that it's just a black nothingness that you're trapped in for the rest of forever, and yet my mind just can't bring itself to believe that there is such thing as Valhalla. Maybe because, how can a heavenly place exist, watching over us all, when all these terrible things are happening down below? How can our creator be so great when Odin allows Dragons to roam the earth? This isn't proof and though I'm all for jumping head first into something it just

doesn't make any sense. They're all just legends for children and I am no longer a child.

Who knows? Maybe there will be something after this. I sure hope so, because my life will have been a major bummer if there isn't. Maybe, if Hiccup decides he doesn't hate me in the afterlife, we can be friends again. It irritates me more than anything about how much I'd like that.

I can feel my consciousness slipping away like stream water through my fingers, and there isn't anything I can do about it. Somewhere in my mind recognizes that the water around me is filled with this loud shrieking noise that is seriously giving me a headache but there's too much water and I can't breathe and I can't \_think. \_That same part of me realizes that it's Hiccup screaming in the water but that's only moments before it fades from my mind. Is water supposed to be this black? Isn't it daytime? Granted, it was a rather cloudy day, but it still should be daytime, and not this dark. Especially since the boat had burst into flames right before we sunk, so it definitely shouldn't be this dark.

\_Who honestly cares about the light? \_I ask in my head. All I know is that the darker it gets the less it hurts and I am sick and tired of being in pain. Hmm, nothingness is actually sounding very promising right now. Yes, I'd like that. I don't have to worry about anything else. They're all better off without me. I can just close my eyes and leave, it won't be painfulâ€¦|

\_How did things even come to this?\_

\* \* \*

><p>"Oh my gods."<p>

Yep, that's about all we have to say as the whole flock of us come upon the scene. Asmund and the other Dragons momentarily pause their flight just to stare in awe at the sight before us. Dragons, hundreds and hundreds of them of all shapes, colors, and sizes, are flying in utter chaos in one giant tornado of colliding limbs, wings, and claws, but they still manage to fire below every now and then, picking off a few Vikings here and there. Though the Dragons are a shrieking mess it's obvious there's something ordering them around, somewhat, and three guesses who.

"How are we going to get into that?" Fishlegs exclaims nervously, a hopeless air to his tone.

I can't help but want to despair a little alongside him at our situation because, \_hello! \_Here is this giant mass of ferocious Dragons all semi controlled by a crazy Alpha species and we're just five kids with Dragons who consist of exactly one who has tasted the freedom of the skies in the past few days. We are so screwed. The reality of it settles in the pit of my stomach, making me realize just how much we're putting our lives at stake, here. Of course we're going against a greater force than us but I'm already stuck beyond help, might as well go deeper.

"Look, guys, this isn't your fault, and I understand if you don't want to help me," I tell them, my eyes trained on the swarming horde of Dragons.

"We're not going anywhere," Ruffnut responds, the rest of them nodding in agreement.

"Besides, that whole swarm of deadly, mindless beasts causing complete and utter havoc in everything they doâ€¦ it's beautiful," Tuffnut slumps his shoulders and I swear his eyes water but I glare at him and wish he was in punching range.

"Not the point," I growl. "We're gonna need all the help we can get. The Dragon Queen works by tricking Dragons into wanting to help her, we've got to get through that mass to help her. Start by one section, make some noise, fire at the Dragons, get them distracted and maybe they'll snap out of it long enough to fly away. Those Dragons don't want to be here any more than we do; they fear the Dragon Queen. Let's try and help them remember that. I've got to go find Hic- uh, the Night Fury. He'll know what to do."

"Don't die!"

"Don't get eaten!"

Very helpful remarks made by my new group of saviors, if those don't fill me with confidence I don't know what will.

"Asmund, let's try the ships. I don't think they would have moved him off," I say and the large Nadder nods, soaring over the ships. Luckily, no stray fire bolts have made their way over to this area so if he is here he won't be harmedâ€¦ too much. I think. I hope.

I'm starting to panic just a little because he should \_be here \_and he's \_not \_and I don't know what to do if I don't find him because, for all I know, they could have lopped off his head the moment they came to the island and if he's dead oh gods I don't even want to think about-

"A-As-str-tri-d!" Asmund cries, swooping down and causing me to yelp and immediately reach for the nearest thing to steady myself, which just happens to be my purple companion's wild mane. "T-there!"

I squint and sure enough, there's Hiccup on one of the boats. Now that the large Viking contraption isn't shifting with the weight of oncoming over-sized men, he's on his feet and desperately trying to break free of his chains but to no avail. Every now and then he'll hurl himself into the air but even if there weren't necklaces of chains choking him back he wouldn't be able to fly away. All because of me.

"Hold on, Toothless," I murmur into Asmund's hair and direct him down to hover right above the ship. Once he's low enough into a comfortable jumping distance, I hop off of his back and gracefully land on my two feet, making a loud \_thudding \_noise. Hiccup's head darts to me, his still damp hair falling in his Dragon eyes. He makes a low growl in his throat and I hold up my hands.

"Easy, Hiccup, it's me!" I shout to him above the clatter of all the shrieking Dragons and screaming Vikings.

Something shifts in his demeanor and his eyes soften, but only just. "Astrid? What are you doing here?"

I scurry over to him and slide my ax from its place on my back. "Well I couldn't just leave you here to die," I explain and set about knocking off the chains tying him to the ship. "I've got your tail."

"You shouldn't be here," he says plainly though I ignore him. Quickly and expertly, I buckle his tail in place and snap everything in place, double checking the gears to make sure they run okay and weren't damaged from the flight here. After it's secure, I pry apart one of the cuffs on his hands with a grunt and he brings it over to his still-chained hand to rub the raw skin. "I mean, you \_really \_shouldn't be here."

"Hiccup, I'm gonna get you out, okay? We're going to take care of your mom. Together. Alright?" I stop for a moment to stare back at him with a stubborn gaze, silently but firmly telling him that I'm not going anywhere.

He doesn't even blink. "No. There is no 'together'. There's nothing you can do to stop her, she's too far gone. You're not going to do anything. There's nothing you can do! What are you and a Deadly Nadder against a Dragon Queen?"

>"I'm not alone," I stick my chin out stubbornly. Seriously, there are more productive things we could be doing other than arguing about stupid little things. "And you need my help just as much as you need mine."<p>

"I've got it handled, okay?" he snaps.

I snort. "Yeah, like you've got \_this,\_" I gesture to the flock of Dragons encircling the sky and the rain of fire that comes down every now and then before leaning back down to break free another chain, "handled."

"You Vikings will just get in the way," he says exasperatedly, but with a furrowed brow that I can't quite figure out. However, what he said makes me angry and I snap back up to a standing position and poke him in the chest.

"Excuse me, your royal highness Night Fury, but \_who \_is the one saving \_who \_right now? That's right; I'm risking my life right now for \_you \_because I couldn't stand the thought of you dying at the hands of Vikings \_or \_that damned Dragon Queen. And for your information, I'm not even a Viking anymore, okay?"

"Wait, what? What does that mean-"

"Hiccup, my dear," a crazed but gentle voice speaks behind us and we both break our intense staring contest and jump. I turn to find Valka Haddock but this woman, no, Dragon, is definitely not Valka Haddock. She's not even a Stormcutter. Why is she here? What makes Hiccup so special to leave the flock of Dragons to come and talk to him?

Her giant four wings are practically the same size as her, hiding her from view every wing beat for a moment or two as she hovers above us. The gentle spikes coming from her head are now sharp and unfriendly looking, a deadly and malicious gaze in her eyes, the pupils as thin as a piece of thread. Her off white coloration has faded to a dull

blueish green and the red accents are no longer an appealing color. There are no traces of what she once was- who she once was. This is not a creature I would want to engage. Her wicked sharp fangs are prominent with every word she speaks and her clawed hands outstretch with her second pair of wings. Her actual appearance isn't what's shocking, it's the simple \_feeling \_that I get from being in the very and ungodly presence of her. This is a power beyond me, beyond Hiccup, beyond an armada of Vikings. Alone, she'd be able to take us on and probably win. I take a glance at Hiccup, so scrawny and frail-looking compared to her, and I can't help but think that \_this \_is the Dragon we feared so much. He's nothing more than a boy. A brave boy, at that, one willing to growl at the Alpha species before him, but a boy all the same.

"What on earth are you doing down here? We need you in the skies," she smiles cruelly down at him and he bares his fangs. My grip on my ax handle shifts from tight to deathly. She mocks surprise at seeing me and her gaze hardens even further, though I previously wouldn't have thought that possible. Something about it makes my stomach drop in the most unpleasant way but I shove the feeling away and glare at her.

"Ah, the little halfling. You and your kind are causing me an awful amount of trouble. My Dragons are having a hard time concentrating."

"On what? You controlling them?" I spit defiantly.

She laughs humorlessly. "You are a lot more trouble than you're worth, little Viking." Flames crackle on the end of her fingertips suggestively. "You really have no idea how \_disposable \_you truly are. What a shame; nice fire. You would have made an excellent Dragon had your Nadder not been so weak. I have half a mind to show you now."

A burst of flame erupts from her hands. Yep. Fire definitely got some upgrades. The heat sears my skin for a moment and I cry out, leaping out of the way and falling backwards but immediately cursing myself when I do. Hiccup growls loudly at the threat and I hear him take a step towards her.

The Dragon Queen gives Hiccup a funny stare, something akin to confusion, if, in her state, she were able to produce such an emotion. Then, though, her eyes widen in realization of something and she cackles, sounding like she's about to regurgitate a fish or something. I turn to Hiccup for an answer but his gaze is hard and he keeps his slit eyes trained on the Dragon above us.

A few moments later, it finally dawns on me that she's \_laughing.\_

"Are you here to gloat?" Hiccup eventually asks, and I notice a flash of pointed teeth in his mouth. I feel like grimacing because, oh, Hiccup, in all your Night Fury glory, how can you possibly take on this powerful and fearsome Dragon?

She promptly stops laughing and addresses Hiccup. "Hiccup, you are in so deep, you can't possibly imagine. But this will play out rather tragically, I'm afraid."



The Dragon Queen lands on the ship, disregarding the thing with a look of distaste. In the blink of an eye, something \_cracks \_against my face and I'm sprawling across the deck. I hear someone shout my name but my eyes are watering.

"She cannot give you anything. You are over your head, little Night Fury. Before, you made me believe that there was absolutely nothing I could tempt you with in order to control you. \_This \_is your dirty little secret? You \_shame \_Dragon kind- this girl is \_nothing.\_"

I crawl to my feet and find Hiccup glaring at his mother with pure and utter hatred. I hear him mutter something, but I can't make it out above the shrieks. Suddenly, the Dragon Queen retracts, taking a few steps before launching back into the air.

She turns to give us a snide smile. "I see you no longer belong to the skies, young Night Fury. I think it would be wise if I were to show you just how in over your head you are."

Hiccups eyes widen in something I later recognize as fear, and he only has half of a second to shout "No-" before the Dragon Queen thrusts her arms forward and our world is engulfed in flames.

You'd think the cold water would be nice compared to the forges of Hell that were so powerful it completely blew the ship to smithereens I just went through, but oh no, that only makes my lungs hurt \_more. \_If that's not bad enough, as soon as I fall into the water, my body automatically takes one large gulp of water and I have to claw my way to the surface, even though I'm not entirely sure which direction is up. I take a guess and hope I'm right.

Air- beautiful, glorious air- greets me along with the smoke of burning wood but hey, it's still oxygen. I'm alive. I'm not underwater anymore. Oh gods, how amazing it feels to be alive. I cough and continue to flail around in the water, desperately seeking the shore, but then, something far beyond the hurt of the scorching flames and the freezing cold hits my system; realization.

"Hiccup!" I gasp, forcing my lungs to relax so I can take one giant gulp.

The water is murky and it's hard to see anything, but sure enough, Hiccup's sunk to the bottom and is desperately pulling at the chains trying to get free. Unfortunately, his one hand is still trapped in his bounds and is caught on some rocks, along with the other chains still attached. That Dragon I swear has the \_worst \_ luck in the history of all Dragons.

The pressure sends warning bells all throughout my brain, that I should not be this deep, and my lungs scream at me that I won't be able to help him in time, but I urge my arms to move faster and kick with both my feet. I will \_not \_let Hiccup die like this, especially when he was being such a jerk about me being there to save him.

He catches sight of me and lets out an incoherent roar. I try to quiet him but he keeps struggling. I hope he knows that's not going to help, if anything, he'll run out of air sooner. I am such an idiot, though. I couldn't pull apart the chains all that well above water, what in Odin's name makes me think I'd be able to under it? All the same, I try and try and try but the chains aren't

giving.

Hiccup lets out a loud roar once again and I give him an apologetic look because I simply \_have \_to get back to the surface. One more gulp of air, and I can try to get help, maybe another Dragonâ€|

I push off the ocean floor and swim as fast as I can but my head is fuzzy and I can't exactly think straight. All I want is air but it's not there and my body doesn't know what to do. It \_hurts \_worse than I'd ever imagine and it suddenly hits me that I'm \_drowning. \_I force all my strength into my legs and arms but they refuse to cooperate and I want to scream but then I'd let out any remaining oxygen in my system.

And just like that, the darkness is all too tempting. It doesn't hurt anymore, and I can hear my pulse in my ears. Is that normal? I don't think so. I don't remember being able to hear it before. I've never really listened for it, honestly. I can feel the darkness seeping into my body, slowly, but it's trickling in like sand and soon I won't be able to hold it back. What little strength that is left is holding it back in a barricade but it's fighting a losing battle. I'm slipping away and it just sounds so promising, to close my eyes and let it all be done.

\_I'm sorry, Hiccup, \_I think. \_I'm sorry. I couldn't save you. I couldn't even save myself. At the very least, I triedâ€|\_

\* \* \*

><p>This is too much darkness. It was supposed to be slow but now I can't see anything. My eyes are open, I'm sure of that, but the light disappeared far too soon far too fast. No, this darkness doesn't belong here, it's too big, too threatening, it shouldn't be hereâ€|!<p>

All of a sudden, my line of sight goes from black to red and I'm laying on my back spitting up about a bucket's worth of sea water. I flip over and bend on my elbows hacking up the liquid that \_definitely \_doesn't belong in my lungs. How am I alive?

I turn to steal a glance at the water around me through a blurry gaze and I see something- no, some\_one, \_diving back into the sea. The figure had been indistinguishable, especially with all the smoke and shadows from the flames around me.

"As-stri-id!" Asmund exclaims, dropping his head right in my face. "Y-you-u're o-ok-kay!"

"Yeah, I-I'm fine," I say, sucking in deep breaths. "W-what about Hiccup?"

"Alpha g-g-o t-to s-s-a-ave N-Night Fu-ry," he explains.

"What? No, the Dragon Queen wouldn't-"

The water explodes before us, showering us with water droplets. I shield my eyes and quickly uncover them to witness Hiccup, fully free of his chains, flapping his wings and lashing his tail out of the water- thank the gods the tail survived it all- but that's not the weirdest part of it all. No, the weirdest part is that, with his free

hand, he's dragging a very large and very soaked Stoick the Vast.

"Hiccup!" I shout, scrambling to my feet and running to meet him at the water's edge. He unceremoniously drops Stoick half in and half out of the water, gulping for air and resting his hands on his knees. "Oh my gods, thank goodness you're okay!"

"If you're going to insist on coming into this battle we need to get in the air," he says with a blank stare, unfolding his wings and rocketing into the sky.

I let out a disbelieving breath and stare at his quickly disappearing form. Is he serious right now? We almost die, me from trying to save him- \_again- \_and that's all he has to say? Something in me drops because wow, he must be \_really \_mad at me for killing that Nightmare, and for some reason, that hurts a lot- that Hiccup would hate me so much. Why does this matter, though? It really shouldn't. That's what I get, I guess. Risking everything for the hope that Dragons aren't what we think they are, and even though they can occasionally speak, they're really no different.

The thought makes my eyes sting but I inwardly growl and fight the cowardly emotion back. Now is not the time to deal with the rejection from a mindless beast.

"Come on, Asmund," I say, narrowing my eyes in concentration. I just hope Hiccup has a plan.

"I-is A-Astri-id o-ok-kay?" he asks, concerned.

"I'm fine," I protest and he tosses me onto his back piggy-back style.

"Astrid!" someone calls behind me and I jump at a hand coming to hold me back for a moment. I snap my head around to become face to face with none other than Stoick.

My eyes narrow and my mouth twists in an irritated scowl. "What do you want?" I ask harshly.

He seems to be taking a moment to process audible thoughts into words, but he eventually says, "It's Valka, isn't it?"

I don't know why, but something about seeing this great Viking so pathetic looking makes me feel almost sorry for him. My eyes soften, much to my displeasure. As much as I hate to admit it, he deserves the truth. I'd want the same in his position, and it's time for me to stop being so selfish.

"No. It's not. That is the Dragon Queen, and she will not hesitate to kill any of us." Except that, well, she's had multiple chances to kill me and yet she hasn't, but, besides the point. "She may look like Valka to us but the woman we used to know no longer resides in that body. I don't know if she's still in there or if there's a way to get her back, but she is not your wife."

"Aye, I figured as much," he agrees dejectedly. "... Which is why you were right. This is something I can't fight."

I nod stiffly.

He doesn't say anything else and though I know I should go, I have to ask. "Why did you save us?"

He sighs and blinks. "I s'pose the least I could do was make sure you didn't die before you got a chance to be a hero."

"I'm no hero," I say with a blank expression but with all the truth in the world in that statement.

He shakes his head ever so slightly, but I ignore the gesture. "That Night Fury," he says, almost as if he's asking a question. "He'sâ€| Well, I mean, he'sâ€| He's my..."

"Yeah," I confirm, putting him out of his verbal misery. I wonder how he pieced it together, but perhaps that's a story for another time. I think he's reached his mental capacity for the time being enough already.

"By the gods," he murmurs and tilts his head back, eyes squeezed shut. When it doesn't appear that he's going to say anything else, I whisper for Asmund to take flight. Right before he does, Stoick calls out:

"You'll make your parents proud."

I freeze and Asmund senses this, pausing his takeoff. I turn around to look at the chief, who refuses to meet my eyes. I stare at him for a long moment or two before I finally understand.

There's this idea in my head, that Stoick and I can come to a singular understanding better than most people because we are die-hard soldiers prepared to do anything to win. We don't let anything get in our way, and people respect us for it. I like to think that this is the reason why I register that this is as close to an apology that he can give, that he's taking back my banishment. And I like to think that this is the reason why he understands my forgiveness, apology, and acceptance all in my one curt nod of my chin. The reality of it is, though, being soldiers has nothing to do with why we understand each other. It's because we have both lost everything and had to keep going, spending the years sharing our pain with no one. I don't know what to think about the fact that I \_understand \_what he's been through, that I know what's it's like because we're really not that different. It's so much easier to despise him because he's the reason I'm about to risk my life and he's the reason Hiccup and I almost died, but that's the simple way. I know far better than to believe that life is simple.

"Hiccup, I hope you have a plan," I mutter into Asmund's wild and untamed mane. He's disappeared in the clouds and I try to tune out all the Dragons to search for the other teens, but they're nowhere to be found. Great.

"Where the heck are--"

"You, little girl, are one hard helmet to crack," none other than the Dragon Queen speaks behind me.

Asmund whirls around, making my head spin a little, but his crown of

horns visibly flatten to his head and I feel his entire diaphragm shake, something I realize is a very low growl.

"Hush, Nadder," she snaps and the rumbling stops, but I can still feel the tense sensation through his frame and erratic beating of his wings.

"Why are you doing this?" I shout.

"Why am I doing this? Doing what?" she asks innocently.

"Killing all the Vikings, controlling the Dragons, losing yourself, why? What are you gaining from it?"

"Gaining from it?" I'm beginning to get a little tired of her answering all my questions with another question. "Little girl, you are playing with a fire that is far too great for you. You better back off before you get burnt."

"I'm not a little girl," I snarl. "And you're not Valka Haddock. But you remember her, don't you? The Stormcutter in you. I'm sure the real Valka is somewhere inside your brain right now, fighting you for control over her own body. Isn't she?"

"No. I am the Dragon Queen and I will prevail!" she shrieks, throwing a ball of flame at me. Luckily, Asmund sucks his wings to his side and we plummet down, narrowly missing being the target of the fire.

"Prevail over what?" I call. Asmund can't take her on, I know that much. Hiccup was brave enough to stand up to her with no fear, I have to hope that he can come through with his threats and hold his own against her. Maybe I can stall her and keep her in place until Hiccup finally decides to show his face. Note to self; the instant he's not attacking the Dragon Queen and saving us all give him a good punch to the face. He could use it.

"Valka's still in there, I'm sure of it," I say to her. "It's why you don't kill Hiccup; it's why you haven't killed me; it's why most of the Vikings down there are still alive. You remember them, don't you? Don't you?"

"No!" she shrieks. "This is beyond you, you've taken one step too close to the fire. It's far too late to go back now, it's time for me to show you just how useless you truly are."<p>

A large fire blast grows in her hands, becoming larger and hotter with every passing second. She grins maliciously and I know that I should be scared. For some reason, I'm not.

Hiccup better have a planâ€¦

The Dragon Queen roars and the giant fireball is suddenly a lot bigger and a lot hotter I yell out and shield my eyes but it won't help; I'm dead either way.

"There's no one to save you now," she tells me with the most evil and chilling tone of voice.

Suddenly, we both turn our heads up at a scream. It's a high pitched and eerie sound, something that is mysterious and definitely

dangerous. When the Dragon Queen's eyes widen, only slightly, but still, I'm struck with the hopeful feeling that maybe all is not lost yet because, yep, you guessed it, that scream is definitely and undeniably the shriek of a Night Fury- the sound he makes right before he strikes.

And he never, ever misses.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Haha, and you thought you weren't gonna get an update tonight! Yeah, I didn't really eitherâ€¦ The past two weeks have been my spring break so I maybe get an excuse? No? Okay. Anyways, as you can probably tell, this is kind of going slower than I'd like but this chapter started to get so long and I just hated the pace it was going at so I kind of deleted it all and started over. This is the end product. I know it's still really -ish but it's better than my first attempt, trust me. Next chapter, we finally, <strong>\_\*\*finally \*\*\_\*\*get to see some action from the Night Fury, yes! You guys have no idea how close this story is to finishing. Like, three more scenes but the chapters will probably be longer. So maybe around five chapters left, give or take. Alright, see you next time!\*\*

\*\*And by the way, special shout out to The Amber Fury and a little bit of Twilight Moon 1 for coming up with last chapter's title, 'How To Do Something Crazy'! Okay, now see you next time.\*\*

## 21. How To Propose A Challenge

\_Sssssccccrreeeeeeeeeeeeech- BOOM!\_

The Dragon Queen lets out an agitated roar and as soon as Hiccup's devastating plasma blast hits her wings she goes soaring through the air, straight into the mass of swirling Dragons screaming at the top of their lungs, most of them scattering their chaotic positions because of Hiccup's cry. This is a good thing, yes, but, unfortunately, Hiccup's blast is so strong that Asmund isn't able to hold his flight and goes tumbling to the ground. I try not to let a scream rip through my own throat as my stomach leaps into my throat in the most unpleasant way and my arms feel like they're being ripped from their sockets as I try to hold on.

"Asmund!" I shriek in warning, the ground way too close for comfort- not that I can really tell all that much because we're spinning around every which way and my sense of direction has pretty much gone up in smoke. Suddenly, the world stops spinning and we're soaring up into the air once again. I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Thatta boy," I praise happily. I perk up when I hear a second screech filling the air around us. Below me, I can hear a chorus of 'Night Fury! Get down!'s that I missed the first time. Vikings are really such predictable people. I roll my eyes but direct Asmund to turn around and fly away a little distance so we won't get caught up in the blast again.

One dark blur, so fast I can barely see it, goes zooming right in front of us, diving down at incredible speeds to the Dragons in front of us. The blur is an expeditious line of screaming death and for a moment I worry that he won't be able to pull up in time. For half of

a quarter of a second, I see the pale tan of Hiccup's hands as he expertly releases a second plasma blast before nimbly lifting up and disappearing into the clouds in less than a span of two seconds, not pausing to see the devastating aftermath of his fire.

It explodes right on the outside of the wall of Dragons and a good number of them are sent flying away uncontrollably. Most of them zip off into the horizon, but a few of them start to lazily return, under the influence of the Dragon Queen who has disappeared inside the sphere of mindless creatures.

"Oh no you don't," I mutter to myself, then, in Asmund's ear, "Let's keep any of these guys from coming back."

He nods in understanding or agreement, I'm not too sure, either way, he flaps his wings in a steady rhythm, taking us towards the returning Dragons. I brace myself against his neck as he growls and shoots out a stream of scorching hot magnesium flames that scare off the other Dragons. From behind us, three more of Hiccup's calamitous fire blasts ring out and Asmund and I dive for cover as more Dragons fly shrieking away. We continue to drive off the returning ones but soon, there are too many.

Just as a few escape past us and I growl in frustration, the exact same few go racing by us. I quickly look behind my shoulder to see the other teens cheering in joy at the retreating forms.

"Thought we deserted you?" Tuffnut shouts, grinning goofily.

I roll my eyes. "Never. Come on, keep it up; Hi- the Night Fury's bound to reach his shot limit soon."

While Hiccup and I had nearly drowned, the others must have gotten mighty comfortable and familiar with their Dragon companions as they, not quite expertly but fair well with all things considering, maneuver throughout the Dragons, blasting here and there and chasing the occasional one off.

Just as the mist seems to clear, a good portion of the remaining Dragons scatter off as the most colossal torus of nearly translucent fire jets out, forming a large, gaping hole in the swarm. I've never seen a Stormcutter's fire but I'm going to take a wild guess and say that the Dragon Queen's natural fire got some upgrades as well because I could have sworn she had orange-red fire. And that orange-red fire most certainly did not swirl in a deadly tornado-like way. I have to admit, though, it's pretty impressive.

In the corner of my eye, I catch the silhouette of a boy with wings and a tail in the clouds, but only for a moment. Unfortunately, I think the Dragons Queen has caught it, too. From this distance, I can see her eyes focus on the spot where he once was and in a heartbeat she uses her oversized x-wings to zoom up into the clouds.

"Hiccup!" I cry, pushing Asmund to fly up after them. I don't know what we'll be able to do, but there has to be something. I can't just sit here and watch him fight her all by herself. I hear a flurry of wings behind me and realize that the others are following me. I urge Asmund to go faster, furrowing my brow. Now is really the time to test that tail. I pray that it's good enough to give Hiccup the speed

he once hadâ€¦ and that a Stormcutter Bonded with an Alpha species isn't faster.

Two blue flashes of lightning echo around the clouds and we halt, scanning the area around us.

"There!" Snotlout shouts, making us all jump. I squint to see where he's pointing, and, sure enough, there's Hiccup, beating his wings faster than I've ever seen him before with the Dragon Queen not too far behind him. He precisely dodges several flares of the torus fire that blasts through the air every few seconds. Luckily, she's not right on his heels, but I curse my inventing abilities that my prosthetic is holding him back. Oh well, I can't afford to worry about it, I have to keep my faith in the fact that it will hold and Hiccup can-

Suddenly, the black blur screeches to a pause in midair and beats one with his wings, colliding with the larger Dragon in a flurry of claws, teeth, flapping wings, and screeches. It's all I can do to watch, dumbfounded, as Hiccup fights literally tooth and claw with the Dragon Queen, the both of them rapidly falling to the ground below from an incredible height. We're too far away to really see anything but simply witnessing this battle between the two great Dragons is enough to leave me awestruck. Hiccup is quite the Dragon, I realize with no remorse. The Dragons we're flying with are only able to resist the pull of the Dragon Queen because we're giving them a job to do; something to focus on. Hiccup doesn't have anyone to tell him what to do, he never has. Not only is he not wild born, but he's resisting her entirely. And on top of that, he has the power and the bravery to attack her head on and hold his own against her. I hate to admit it but a lot of my respect goes towards him in that instant.

Just as I about scream for them to pull up, the two Dragons burst away, flinging themselves away from each other as if they are disgusted to have touched one another, and soar back into the sky. I snap out of my dazed state and quickly tell Asmund to fly after Hiccup. He seems a little reluctant but I'm persuasive enough.

The Dragon Queen starts to go after Hiccup once more and I panic. "Asmund, go!" I shout, but I know he won't be able to catch them.

"C-can't ca-t-tch," he states apologetically, but he still darts forward.

"I know," I frown. The Dragon Queen darts ahead and snaps at Hiccup's feet. My eyes narrow. "But you can shoot. Fire now!"

Startled, Asmund screeches to a halt and his hands shoot out, releasing bursts of flame that travels in the blink of an eye and falls short a few feet away. My head smacks into the back of Asmund's horns and I cry out because by the \_gods \_that hurt! Something wet runs in my eyes, clouding my vision, and I curse when I realize it's blood.

"You have \_got \_to be kidding meâ€¦" I grumble through gritted teeth, clutching my forehead. "Ow that hurt-

"Don't you touch her-! \_Astrid!\_"



Hiccup's nasally voice sounds from far away, but his shout sounds like it's right in my ear. He's worried about something, I can tell that much. What's wrong? My mind is kind of fuzzy but I make myself focus. Okay, so, Asmund'sâ€¦ flying kind of fastâ€¦

And suddenly, he's not there at all and I'm not flying at all.

"\_Aaahhhhhhhh!\_" I shriek, quickly plummeting to my death. My head pounds but I'm trying to focus on something, \_anything, \_to make myself think slowly and logically but it's a little hard when you're a bit distracted with falling from about a few hundred feet in the air. I force myself to stop screaming but it still doesn't help anything. The only way I can, well, not die, is to somehow get back in the air. I have wingsâ€¦

No, I don't. The Dragon Queen took them away, and I'm okay with that. I don't have to worry about it anymore. I don't want to worry about it anymore. It's not my problem. It's gone and I don't miss it. I don't have any more wings. I stare at my arms, covered up by the bondings, and I breath out an exasperated sigh. No. I already lost. I'm already done, what's the point? I've already been through this, my whole...entire...lifeâ€¦

Oh, screw it. All of it.

I press my lips together and attempt to reach deep into my mind. Something pains a little, forcing me back, like a memory I can't recall that's on the tip of my tongue. It's entirely monotonous to try and bring back but I know I can, somehow.

\_Bond, \_I command. Nothing changes and nothing happens. I try harder but nothing's there. \_Come on, Astrid, you're life kind of depends on it right now!\_

I open my eyes and the ground is alarmingly close. Too close. I'm dead, I'm so dead, I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm dead. I scream.

Something catches me by the arm and the world stops spinning. I look up to see a black blur and my stomach lurches to look down and realize how fast the world is going by.

Hiccup's here, he saved me! He doesn't hate my guts! Well, obviously. I mean, I can't imagine Hiccup letting anyone die, but I can see him holding a grudge. What I did is definitely grudge-worthy. But still. I can be happy that I'm alive. Payback for me saving his lifeâ€¦ sort of.

We land behind a cove a little ways, Asmund and the others are there, too.

"What are you all doing here?" I ask, frowning as I wipe blood off the side of my face.

"A-As-strid! As-m-mund is-s s-s-so-o s-so-so-orry-y!" Asmund cries, flapping over to me and wrapping his wings around me and practically choking me. I like to say I'm strong for my age and physique but when a Dragon twice your size with enhanced strength beforehand hugs you

as tightly as he can it's going to hurt no matter what.

"Ow! Asmundâ€¦ can'tâ€¦ breatheâ€¦!" he immediately lets me go and I suck in a breath. When I see his apologetic look, I ask gently, "What happened?"

"The Dragon Queen, that's what happened." Hiccup explains. "She went after Asmund and you fellâ€¦ I'mâ€¦ Oh gods, I'm so sorry," he reaches out his hand, aiming for my face, but he quickly drops it and looks down.

"Don't worry, you didn't do anything," I assure him, then, turning to Asmund, "And you didn't either, it was my fault for startling you. I'm fine, okay?"

"You don't look fine," Hiccup mumbled. "This is why you guys shouldn't interfere."

"Interfere?" I question, raising my voice and temper. "Interfere with what? We're trying to help you and we were doing a pretty good job of it. Look, I don't know why you can't just forget about being mad at me for five minutes so we can take care of the Dragon Queen but-

"Mad at you? Astrid, you- are so- ...Argh!" he growls and lets out an inhuman annoyed sound from his throat along with it. I fold my eyes and glare at him.

"Moving on, now," I say, because I really don't want to deal with this right now and my head still hurts so it'd be a really bad idea to mess with me. I might have lost my ax somewhere between all the flying and the falling, but I'd still be more than willing to punch someone in the face. "I hope you have a plan, Mr. Night Fury."

He shakes his head and sighs. "Yeah, I do."

"Care to let us in on it?"

"I'm going to challenge her," he states.

"You're going to what?"

"Challenge her," Fishlegs cuts in. "He's going to duel her one on one for the top spot of the Dragons."

I gape at him. "How do you know this?"

"I read it in a section of the Dragon Manual," he shrugs, looking uncomfortable with the sudden attention from us all.

"Butâ€¦ Hiccup, how do you plan on winning something like that?"

His lips curve up in an odd-looking smile. "You remember those Terrors? I've been thinking a lot about them lately and the gas that they produced right before they fired. It's kind of a well known fact but I'm thinking it just might come in handy in this situation. An explosion will generally do the trick. We might be Dragons but, for the most part, we're not all fire-proof."

"Okay. Okay, fine," I breathe. I don't know how to accept this but

it's the only plan we've got so far. I ask Hiccup, "How do we help?"

He sighs once again, as if he's reluctant to accept our help, which is completely stupid because he shouldn't, we have been keeping the Dragons he blasts away from coming back and helped at least the Dragons get out of the swarm. He really needs to get off his pedestal and realize that he does need help. "When I challenge her, the other Dragons have to leave. I need you guys to get them as far away as possible. Lead them somewhere away, somewhere safe."

"What? What about you? What do we do when-"

"I don't know," he admits. "I'll figure it out some how. Just make sure that when she lets them go, they get out of here. Oh, also, someone needs to stay and lead the Vikings somewhere on the far side of the island so they have time to maybe regroup and find a way home."

"I'll do it," I immediately step in. Asmund is the only Dragon I completely trust to stay focused on his own and while I'm nervous at leaving the teens alone to deal with an entire mob of Dragons I have to trust that they can pull through and do it in time.

"But, um, H-Hiccup, is it?" Fishlegs intervenes once more, stuttering a little. It hits me that Hiccup is a stranger, a remarkable Dragon who can talk and is on their side as much as Asmund, and it's amazing that they're trusting him at all. "Challenging another Dragon typically means-"

"I know what it means," he snaps threateningly. I stare at him for a moment because I'm not quite sure what else to do. This isn't my Hiccup. I mean, no, that came out way wrong, Hiccup is not mine in any aspects whatsoever, I just mean the Hiccup I know. The gawky, awkward one with the driest sense of humor I've ever known. The one who became my friend against all odds, including the ones we placed against ourselves. Somehow, I draw a conclusion that this must have been the Hiccup before he found out that he could have a friend. The one who turned sour at the loss of his mother and who had been alone for many years, fending for himself in a dark world. No matter how powerful and feared he was he had always been alone. Maybe Hiccup isn't so different from me, after all.

No, this isn't the Hiccup I know. This is the Hiccup who's determined to help save us all when it is not his responsibility to. He's simply doing it because— I don't know, he can't bear the thought of his mother hurting anyone? Dull, I know, but I guess I can see it.

"Alright, whatever happens, happens. Don't stop flying away, got it?" Hiccup addresses the other teens with their Dragon companions. They all nod in understanding. "And Astrid; keep the Vikings going. No. Matter. What. Understand?"

"Yes," I say in an annoyed manner.

"No, I need you to say the words: 'I understand, Hiccup'."

"I understand, Hiccup," I unfold my arms only to place them on my hips.

"Promise?"

"Yes."

"You have to swear."

"Oh, for the love of-"

"Okay, good luck to you all. I hope the best and I didn't say this before, but thank you all for helping. It means a lot."

\_And I guess \_my \_help doesn't count for anything, right? How come they all get thanks and all I get is 'you shouldn't be here'? I thought we were friends!\_

Just as he's about to take off, I can't stand it. "Hiccup!"

He nearly trips on his face, making me smile inwardly because there's that awkward little Dragon, but only momentarily.

"Can I speak with you a moment?"

He turns towards the sky, eying the circling Dragons above. He nods.

I lead us away behind a large rock in an enclosed little area. I hate apologizing. It absolutely sucks.

"Look, I'm sorry. I know you're upset and all-"

"Astrid, I'm not upset."

"Would you let me finish?" I shout at him, though it doesn't sound like one with all the Dragon calls. I suck in a breath and continue. "I'm not...proud, of what I did, that is. After I couldn't change it, I realized how much I wanted to and I just wanted you to know that. So, you know, you don't hate me."

Hiccup's expression softened and his eyes dilated a bit, making him look a little more like that scrawny Dragon in the cove that second time, calling out, 'My name's Hiccup'. "I don't hate you, Astrid."

"Really? Cause it sure seems like you do," I pout and blow my bangs out of my eyes.

"No, I really don't. I know you killed the Dragon, it's fine, okay? Don't beat yourself up about it."

"A little late for that one, there, bud," I mutter. "Wait, if that's not why you were upset then why were you really?"

He sighed. "Do you recognize the name Valka Haddock?"

"Yes," I nod, thinking to myself, \_that's your mother.\_

"So you know who she is? Wellâ€¦" he looks up at the sky, another torus of fire cuts through the fog of Dragons. "That's her. And the Viking Alphaâ€¦ Yeah." Hiccup hangs his head, his brown hair falls in

his eyes and makes him look a lot younger than he did a few moments ago. "It's just hard to accept thatâ€¦ Well, I'll never be accepted. That man is not someone capable of change and Iâ€¦ I don't know where I belong."

In my time of need, Asmund had been there to push me on. I guess now I need to be there for Hiccup. I rest my hand on his arm reassuringly. I don't really know how to comfort people, but I can understand what he's going through a lot better than most. "I know, Hiccup. I know the feeling. Butâ€¦ hey, look. Maybe it isn't for the worst. Your father, Stoick, I got banished for trying to save you instead of the other Vikings in that arena. But he dove down and \_saved \_us from drowning. And he lifted my banishment. Shouldn't he get a little credit?"

I can't believe I'm actually standing up for Stoick, but I convince myself it's not for him, it's for Hiccup.

"Trust me, no one understand what you're going through better than me."

He smiles. "Thanks, Astrid." He blows out through a hole in his mouth and flaps his wings. "Soâ€¦ You got back into the tribe?"

"Yeah," I say. "Butâ€¦ to be honest, I don't really know if I'm going to take it. I mean, I thought I was, I really did, but nowâ€¦ I don't know. I've never really felt like I belonged there. Maybe I can find Asmund and we can fly off to somewhere and start anew. What about you? What are you going to do when this is all over?"

"I- â€¦ I really don't know," he admits, practically whispering. His face is a funny shade of red. It's not from embarrassment, if it was he'd be an absolute tomato, but it's...something. I can't quite pinpoint it. "Don't worry about the Nightmare, okay? We've all got a little blood on our hands that won't ever wash off. You have to just keep scrubbing or learn to live with it. That's the only choice you've got and you don't strike me as someone who lives in the past."

He gives me a toothy grin- a real smile, one without his dangerously pointed teeth, the rare trait he has of being able to retract his Dragon teeth and replace them with human ones- but it's the tiniest bit bittersweet. I return it and punch him in the arm.

"That's for making me think you were mad at me," I say seriously. He rolls his eyes. I don't know how this is going to turn out, but it might be a long time before I see him again. For all I know, he'll fly off after this, whether he wins or loses, and never return. I hold on tighter than I mean to and though it takes a moment for him to wrap his arms around me and bury his face in the crook of my neck (because we're practically the same height), my eyes are squeezed shut. I don't tend to do the whole 'hugging' thing, I'm not one for close proximity, but this, it feelsâ€¦ I don't know, almost...nice. Seriously, I normally recoil from physical contact unless it's absolutely necessary and- holy gods of Asgard what the hell is \_that?\_

Something in the pit of my stomach suddenly makes me feel sick. It makes me want to curl up in a ball and die because it's something akin to embarrassment, but maybe not quite as bad. My body

temperature seems to raise by ten degrees and I can literally feel my face going red. What is happening to me?

I try to act casual as I slip out of his embrace and breathe through my nose. When I look at him again, it seemsâ€¦ different. I have a hard time looking at his eyes but I try to force the odd feeling down because it's so uncomfortable and I have no idea what to do with it.

He smiles at me, a bit of a question in his green eyes that I just happen to notice because I'm still trying hard not to look at his face.

"For everything else," I smile. "Good luck, Toothless."

"You too, Stormy."

No matter what happens, I'm glad we part as friends once again. We're from different worlds and we really shouldn't have met at all, but by some miracle, here we are. It seems that life pulls you in different directions and the only thing you can do is be thankful for the ride.

He flaps his wings, lifting himself in the sky. His prosthetic tail gleams in the stormy grey of the sky and I feel a twinge of pride when I realize that not only had I invented it but it had saved his life and was about to once again. I pray that I don't jinx it and it fails in a dive bomb or something.

I turn to seek Stoick and tell him of the plan, but suddenly, Hiccup is hanging upside down not two inches in front of my face.

"Gah!" I cry out on surprise. "Hiccup! You nearly gave me a heart attack!"

His face is red from the lack of oxygen to his brain and his longish hair hangs upside down, making him rather funny-looking. "If you don't find Asmund, and you still find that you don't belong with the Vikings, wellâ€¦" he starts stammering a bit and I can't really understand him. That weird feeling is back and my stomach lurches. Not in the way it does when I'm flying, but in a way that I know is totally safe but still feels awful.

"Hiccup, what?" I finally ask, a bit of amusement in my tone because, again, his serious Night Fury side has faded to reveal his less Draconic side and I get a real taste of what he'd be like as a normal human. It's sad, though, because while I like his personality, I can't imagine Hiccup as a normal human being.

He takes a deep breath, like he's about to spew fire, if Dragons could actually do that, of course. "I don't really belong anymore, either. Maybe, if you wouldn't mind, we can not belong together, after this is all done."

I pause for a moment. We had made a good team together when we were working in the cove, and Hiccup made me something that I don't even remember before I met him; happy. I don't think about it for long before I realize that I wouldn't mind it. Not in the least.

I smile. "I'm holding you to that."

Sometime later on, I'll look back on this, I'm sure, and maybe, just maybe, see that hint of the weird glint in his eyes and realize that it was shock. Not at my reply, he's actually really happy about my reply, and though I don't notice it now, the glint that flashes is shock at his words.

"Until then, milady," his grin is crooked and doesn't quite reach his eyes. He must be nervous about challenging his mom. I don't blame him. I also try to ignore the fact that he called me 'milady' and the fact that it stirred that weird feeling again.

This time, he really does fly away. I don't waste time watching him talk to his mom, I have to count on Hiccup that she'll accept and release all the Dragons like he said she would. I have to trust him that he knows what he's doing because all of our lives kind of depend on it.

Finding a still-dazed Stoick and talking to him feels almost like a blur. I don't really remember much of any of it, really. I know that he agrees and has no trouble at all rounding up everyone remaining and telling them to follow him, who in turn begins to follow me. I try to walk fast, I really do, but there are so many empty thoughts roaming my head that I don't know where to start.

"So, the Night Fury's gonna challenge Valka, huh?" a voice asks behind my shoulder and I turn to see Gobber hobbling behind me.

"Uh huh," I nod.

"Wow. It's really Valka. After all these yearsâ€¦ And she's a big, controlling, strong Dragon. Of course she is. Stoick must be taking it hard."

"Gobber, stop rambling, please," I say, trying not to sound too harsh.

"Oh, right. I had a point to this all, I swear," he says.

I make a sound, sarcastically agreeing with him.

"Hey," he catches my wrist and I instantly freeze. Though it's all gone, I still find myself silently freaking out whenever someone touches within that vicinity of my wrist area.

"Yes?" I ask, my voice strained.

"Us Vikings are tough. Most of the time, at least. Either way, we can get ourselves to the other side of an island. That Night Fury's gonna need all the help he can get."

"Gobber, I can't do anything," I protest, slowly trying to pull out of his grasp.

He smiles, his silver replacement tooth glinting. "Come on, that's not true. Or are you not Dragon enough?"

"What?" I practically shout, but I freeze once again because Gobber then practically tears off my arm binding, revealing the blue scales on the inside of my wrist- the one reminder I have of the beast

contained within meâ€¦ the beast that's gone forever.

And Gobber completely is not surprised to see it there.

"Hmm. I would have thought there'd have been more," he frowns thoughtfully.

"Huh?" I exclaim dumbly. I blink. "Youâ€¦ You \_knew\_?"

"Well, you told me, didn't you?" his blue eyes shine with mischief and I think back, my own blue orbs wide in shock. Gobber knows about me? How long? And I told him? I neverâ€¦

"Oh my gods, you heardâ€¦" I whisper. I remember now. In the forge, when he fell asleep, and his mask was on, and I thought he couldn't hearâ€¦ And I practically spilled everything to him.

"Every word," he confirms gently. Then, in a lighter tone, "I told you we would be behind you. Maybe not all the Vikings are, but I know of at least one who still is- always was."

He winks at me and my heart can't help but swell with a love I barely acknowledged before now, the affection I hold for this man who took me in when I had no family and practically raised me. And I had thought that I was so, so alone. I feel bad when I realize this because I had been feeling so sorry for myself when I really had him the whole time. And what did I do? I always pushed him away. I suppose I can't degrade myself too much, it's kind of an Astrid Hofferson thing to do, anyway.

"But Gobber," I rub the scale with my other thumb, staring down at it. "The Dragon Queen repels Turning Dragons. I can't Bond even if I wanted to."

"Something holding you back has never stopped you before, am I right? Where there's a will, there's a way."

"Even if I could, I don't know how to fly."

"I'm a firm believer in learning on the job."

"I have to trust Hiccup that he can do this. If he can't, we have to worry about getting everyone off the island, still-"

"Astrid," he cuts me off. "A challenge between two Dragons is a fight to the death."

I stop in my tracks because seriously? How stupid can I get? Of course it is, what else could it be? I should have figured that out! I should have known! Hiccup might be able to hold his own but I don't know ifâ€¦ The explosion, he can do it, but he'd have to be in close range to fire specifically at the gas that lights up for about a second, and her fire has been enhanced beyond anything I've ever seen. The explosion with the Terrors had been enough to make them fly backwards, how big of an explosion would this be?

Certainly not small enough for a Dragon in close range to get out of.

I quickly glance at the sky, and the absurd noise level is dying down



as the Dragons begin flocking away. I can make out Ruffnut, Tuffnut, and the Zipplebacks herding the Dragons from behind, Fishlegs and Snotlout must be in the front leading. The Dragon Queen accepted.

If everything goes according to plan, this explosion will not be small. That's why he wanted everything and one gone. And why he made extra sure to make me promise not to come back. Why did he ask me to come with him when this was all done? Maybeâ€¦ maybe he was just trying to say goodbye. That was why his smile was filled with a strange expression. Sorrow. He was mourning the future he wouldn't get because he knew he was sealing his fate. Oh my, I am such an idiot!

I curse, looking down at my hands, then up at the sky. I can't make out any flying figures.

"Hiccup, you stupid, stupid, halfâ€¦"

My words fade on the tip of my tongue because I pause for a moment before I take off running. The crowd of Vikings stare at me but they quickly part. No one so much as attempts to stop me but I'm not even offended.

This time, I don't try to force it out. I don't try to feel for it. My heart is pounding and my mind is spinning, everything about me is screaming but I don't know if it's good or bad. All I can think of is \_Hiccup's going to sacrifice himself, Hiccup's going to sacrifice himself!\_ and it's enough to make me stop thinking altogether. I gracelessly throw myself into the sky, spreading wings that certainly had not been there a few moments agoâ€¦

...And \_fly.\_

Most of the time, I absolutely loathe breaking promises, mostly because my entire life has been empty promises, whether they're from others or from myself. I really hate breaking them, it's just wrong and if Hiccup wasn't mad at me for killing a Dragon he's certainly going to be mad at me for this kind of stunt. I really, really hate breaking my promises, but in this case, I think the situation more than permits it.

Either way, I suppose it doesn't matter. I don't stop to think about it. Actually, I don't stop for anything, including the two strips of woolen cloth that flutter uselessly to the ground, ripped beyond repair.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Okay, so some might count this as a spoiler alert but it's really not. For one, I'm good at writing drama and a little romance , but actually going into detail is kind of weird and incredibly awkward so I hope I did a good enough job describing a crush from a (really, really, <strong>\_\*\*really\*\*\_\*\*) benighted character in an interesting yet slightly amusing way. Also, it might be a little confusing, but I remember stating that Astrid does not have her ax in the arena but does when she frees Hiccup. She obviously stopped at the docks to retrieve it and yes, she did lose it while falling in this chapter so just remember that. There was something else I wanted to mention but I can't really remember it so I'll just take my leave now.\*\*

## 22. How To Face Your Fate

This has to be the least important aspect that has happened, but I can't help but notice that my clothes have changed. My short sleeve blue cotton shirt has been replaced with a mid sleeve one that is rough to the touch, almost like scales. My spiked skirt is still there in some aspects, only now it's tan with blue Nadder spikes and I don't have my leggings. I have something akin to Hiccup's vest without the fur in a dull red color as well. I'm a bit baffled by this. Obviously, Dragons don't wander around naked, they get their clothes from somewhere, I guess we've just never stopped to wonder where. Although, the main question about my sudden change in apparel is where did my other clothes go? It's not like they can just disappear, and how does an Ancestral Dragon get rid of your shoes?

I shake my head, pursing my lips. A metallic tinge fills my mouth and I curse, forgetting that my teeth are now extremely sharp. I can feel the wind whistling through a gash on the bottom of my lip and I really hope that heals soon- if I get out of this alive, that is. I experimentally swing my tail around and my balance is suddenly lurched to the right. Slowly, I regain my balance, feeling very aware of the fact that I've only technically flown once before. This is what it must be like to be an actual Dragon hatchling, clumsy and awkward in the air, but still free because they are Dragons and \_this \_is where they belong.

My wings stretch out beyond my fingertips and the wind shudders beneath me. Everything around me is sharpened, I can see far below me and high above, the detail of the clouds or even that of Stoick's astonished face down below. I want to smile to myself but I don't have time.

\_I did it, \_ I think, closing my eyes and spiraling upward. Gods almighty, I did it! I'm suddenly overwhelmed with the urge to laugh and I swear my eyes shine. My chipper mood fades away, then. I'll miss my eyes. I'll miss me! But it's too late to go back now. I have to save Hiccup.

The clouds envelop my vision and even though my senses are sharpened there's nothing details of condensed water can do to help me see. My wings quickly become damp as I stroke in circles, desperately searching for Hiccup. Or Valka. Or anyone, really. Something loud surrounds my ears and my heightened sense of hearing does not cope well. It takes a few seconds to realize that that's \_me. \_I'm \_roaring. \_

I instantly close my mouth and my eardrums thank me. Then, I pick up something else. It's faint, but it's definitely there. A screech. It's building, more and more and more, and I can immediately tell that it's going to get a whole lot louder. No, not again, \_my \_roar hurt my ears, I can only begin to imagine what a high pitched plasma blast screech will do!

Too late. The screech echoes around me and I shriek, jerking my hands over my ears. The only problem with that is, well, see, I'm a Nadder, and Nadders have their wings attached to their \_arms. \_The effect is instantaneous and I plummet like a metal pole in water. I flail my limbs but my mind is everywhere and my instincts are too raw to catch

me. Great, I'm going to fall before I even get the chance to do anything. Again. What is up with the gods trying to kill me off? Don't they know I'm trying to help?

I open my mouth again- this time to scream. Nobody's there to catch me, though, so I don't know why. It's a reflex of the body, to scream when terrified. Okay, so flying is...pretty great. Amazing, even. But falling? Not so much. Gods I hate the feeling of my stomach coming up into my throat. I'm not afraid of heights, mind you, else I wouldn't be here in the first place and Vikings are drilled with the thought that irrational fears are irrational (heights being one of them). Even Fishlegs eventually got over it, though I'm sure dangling us above a cliff didn't help matters in the slightest.

Suddenly, the world flip flops and blood rushes to my face as I find myself dangling upside down. I tuck my chin in and grin up at a wide eyed Hiccup.

"You- you're a Dragonâ€¦!" he says, staring at me in utter disbelief.

"Keep up," I retort.

"What in a great Alpha's name are you doing here?" he shakes his head, blinking a couple times as if to push the bewilderment to the back of his mind for the moment before tossing me up in the air. My wings snap open and I am able to glide beside him. I have to work to keep up with his slow soar but I'm inexperienced and he's a Night Fury. It's totally and completely unfair but it's true. I'd like to say that I'm not above admitting that someone is my superior, but that's not entirely candid.

"Coming to save your sorry butt."

"No, I mean after that; what were you doing? Are you out of your mind?" That question is debatable but I disregard it.

"I had it under control," I argue, flapping my wings laboriously to keep up with him.

"You were nearly killed. Again," he adds.

I huff angrily, blowing my bangs out of my face. "Okay, so maybe I was spiraling out of control a little bit, but I would have gotten it handled."

(Let's face it; I was totally about to die.)

"And we have more important issues," I point out, nodding at the sky around us. There's not a Dragon Queen insight and I don't ever believe something's dead until I see it burned at the pyre. Hiccup looks at unease a bit as well. "Where'd she go?"

"I don't know," he admits. "The last time I saw her she was tumbling out of the sky."

"Great. So now we've lost the Dragon we're trying to kill. Which reminds me." My flight drops for a couple seconds as I pause flapping to punch Hiccup in the face as hard as I can.

"What the heck, Astrid?" he cries out, grasping his nose. "What was that for? Ow, that hurt!"

"That's for challenging an Alpha species when you knew what would happen and didn't tell me," I growl at him, feeling no remorse. That pain he just felt? That's what I felt when I realized that I probably wouldn't ever see him again. Over dramatic much? Probably. All the same true? Definitely.

He sighs, still cupping his face. When he speaks, it makes his voice sound extra nasally. "Yeah, about that-"

"There has to be something else. I can't just let you die," I say sincerely. I'm not alone anymore but if there was anyone I'd rather lose Hiccup would be the farthest down the list. I \_can't \_lose him.

"Astrid, listen-"

"No, I'm not going to listen, I won't let you go through with this. Please, Hiccup, you have to see-"

"Astrid!" he cuts me off, grasping my shoulders and leaving me unable to flap all that well. It's a good thing he keeps us up with his wings.

"What?" I snap, glaring at him. My glare fades when I really see his face. It's not necessarily relaxed, maybe a bit nervous. His thick eyebrows are furrowed together, his eyes clouded with worry and maybe a bit of remorse, regret, I don't know. Something in them is able to tell me what he can't put into words.

"You're not going to kill her," I say softly.

He hangs his head, sighing once more. "I know what she is. I know \_who \_she is, what she could do. But- but I \_can't \_just becauseâ€¦ I tried to tell myself I could butâ€¦ Astrid, she's still my \_mom.\_"

"I know. I can't really say I understand your predicament, but we'll figure something out, okay?" I tell him reassuringly. Seeing him so torn up about things makes me feel sad and I hate feeling sad because there's too much to be sad about. "We'll figure something out," I repeat. "And Hiccup, even if we can't, you are not alone."

"Thanks," he tells me. I slowly retract my arms, flapping to stay upright. That weird feeling is rising again and I'm so not sure what to do about it. It makes me want to punch something- preferably Hiccup, which I've already done but is still sounding rather satisfying- or, worse, do something unimaginable that I'm slightly mortified and slightly-but-\_only-very\_-slightly overjoyed that I've experienced before- again, preferably to Hiccup. It's so stupid. That's all I have to say about it.

"Well I sincerely doubt our troubles are over with," I mention, ignoring my thoughts and turning the focus back to what really matters. "Speaking of which, where did my clothes go?"

"I was wondering when you changed outfits." I roll my eyes at this. Seriously, Hiccup? And he calls \_me \_a stupid half-human. He shrugs

in response, beating his wing span once through the air, sending wisps of clouds scattering and leaving me practically in the dust. This speed is absolutely unacceptable and once I get used to it I am going to have to do something about it. I can't be overly exceeded by \_Hiccup, \_even if he is a Night Fury. "And I don't know. I've never actually seen a Dragon Bond before."

I have. While I don't remember Uncle Finn's clothes changing, I have to give myself credit because I was just a child and there had been a lot going on that night, what with the whole 'my uncle just Bonded with a Dragon' dilemma and all.

"Oh well. So, what's the plan?"

Hiccup presses his mouth together, his eyes set in concentration. There's a serious tone to him in this moment that has been present ever since I freed him from the boat. It's like he's this deadly weapon that exists solely to fight. He's not the playful, innocent, and painfully oblivious teenage boy that I've come to know. He's more like— Well, he's more like \_me. \_And I'm not sure if I like it on Hiccup. Not sure at all.

"-and is there something on my face? Are you even listening?"

I suddenly realize that he's been talking to me and I shake my head in attempt to jolt my mind back to reality. "Of course I am."

He gives me this look that screams 'I don't believe you' in the way that only he could pull off and I smile to myself (inwardly, of course) because even though this is serious, it's nice to see a bit of the old Hiccup. I'm not going to say that I know the real Hiccup, because, for all I know, I don't. I'm not positive that he knows the real Astrid, how can I expect to think that I know who he really is? I can't, simple. Hypothetically, if someone were to shoot down a very rare and dangerous Dragon, like, I don't know, \_a Night Fury, \_they can't just help them out again and think that they know everything about that Dragon. Hypothetically.

The clouds have only gotten thicker and it doesn't feel quite right. Shouldn't I be more scared? Shouldn't I feel like these are the last moments I'll ever spend here? Maybe I should, but I don't feel that way. Instead, everything inside me feels— at peace. I know, strange. I think we've already established that there's something not entirely normal about me, so— But seriously, it's not over. It's not even close to being over, and yet I feel so calm. Like, way calmer than I've ever been in my whole life.

My confusion is put to rest not two seconds later.

"Hi-" I address Hiccup when, suddenly, Hiccup's not there anymore. "Hiccup!" I shriek as the Dragon Queen tackles him out of the sky. I send a quick prayer to all the gods for whatever Dragon instincts I've been repelling all these to come out and to come out \_now. \_I quickly fold my arms in, immediately plummeting. Once again, my stomach leaps to a place where it certainly does not belong but I ignore it and will myself to fall faster. Huh. Never thought I'd be saying that.

I can hear them both snarling but I can't distinguish the two, it's all too loud. It's a fine line of making sure the both of them-

mostly Hiccup- doesn't get hurt and not hurting myself to a point where I'm rendered useless. Plus, I'm not used to having wings, spikes, and a tail, so I'm not the most graceful flier which doesn't help matters at all.

Hiccup's wings are splayed underneath him with his feet pushed against the Dragon Queen's stomach, barely keeping her at bay as she lunges with her own claws and fangs. I can see him try and snap back on her, attempting to gain leverage so he's not falling from below, but it isn't working. I have to do something, and fast. But what can I do without harming Hiccup? Is my aim good enough? I glance up at my tail (remember the whole plummeting thing?) and it moves seemingly on its own accord, assuring me that I can trust it. I haven't trusted it at all since I've known it was there in some sense, but now's the time to. It's now or never.

I suck in a breath, then immediately whip my tail around. I don't know how many spikes, maybe six or seven, I'd say, go flying down and hit the Dragon (the bad one, not the good one) square in several places, not an exact target but definitely far from missing. Huh, what do you know, I'm a natural. I silently cheer when she roars in agony and releases Hiccup. Instantly he's flipped around and beating his wings to break his fall. As he goes shooting upwards, some limb darts out and grabs me by the arm, nearly jerking it out of its socket but still pulling me upwards as speeds I haven't dreamed of trying yet. Then, he lets go and the momentum sends me flying upwards a few feet higher before I spread my arms out and catch myself with my wings.

"You alright?" he ask. I nod, though I should be the one asking him that. He doesn't look alright. His bare feet are clawed and a bit bloody and he has several scratch marks on his arms and one on his face. I'm still unharmed and she seems to be targeting Hiccup, though I don't know how long that will last.

"Yeah. You?"

>"I'm fine. She's still somewhere around here so watch your back; listen to your instincts. Most of the time, they're pretty on track so trust them."<p>

I hate getting advice from a professional in an area I am novice at best in, but I nod stiffly because he is really trying to help me.

A low growl echoes around the clouds, causing both of us to snap to attention and encircle a small area back to back. A small bubble of something that absolutely revolts me arises and it's even worse than the weird feeling in my stomach (okay, maybe it's a good tie). I shudder when I realize what it is: fear.

I see Hiccup's eyes swivel to me in the corner of my own. In a flash that I can't even detect, he turns around to face my back and he asks lowly in my ear, "You know what could happen if we can't figure something else out, right?"

I stiffen, sucking in a silent breath and praying he doesn't notice. "Yes," I reply. If we can't do this, an explosion will have to take place and the chances of our survival have already dwindled down into single digits.

"I'm really sorry, Astrid. I never meant for any of this."

"And you think I did?" I ask, turning around in midflight.

His lips give way to a tight and bitter smile. It doesn't look right on him. "Are you afraid?"

I shake my head. I'm never afraid. At least, not on the outside.

It's more a feeling than a sight that I see him smile. "Well I'm terrified."

I grant him a small, somber smile, bringing his arm to wrap around my opposite forearm so he can support me while I place my hand on his shoulder. The downfall of having wings attached to your arms; you can't multitask very well.

"You are not alone, Hiccup Haddock," I remind him, just one more time.

"Good," he replies. We don't get a chance to continue because in that moment, one giant stream of searing hot fire bursts from the clouds below our feet, separating us and sending us both rocketing backwards.

"Whoa!" I shout, then, when I can't find Hiccup anywhere in sight, I call out his name. I never really heard his new plan, let alone if he actually has one.

Fly up, something tells me, and he did say to listen to my instincts, so I do. A few wingbeats and I soar into a new clearing, a little bubble within in the thick, grey clouds. I'm met by Hiccup's concerned look.

"Astrid! Are you alright?"

"You know, if you keep asking me that every time something happens, it's going to get very old..." I fade off warningly. Honestly, it's not like I'm completely helpless, I think I've demonstrated that more than enough times.

"She's coming back any second now," he points out, his nostrils flaring as he tries to sense her. I twist my mouth, attempting to do the same thing, but even if I knew how to do that in the first place I don't detect anything.

"The plan?" I ask instead.

Hiccup grins sheepishly but there's a spark of mischief, reaching up to rub the back of his neck with his hand. "Well, the thing is..." he flies upwards and I follow him, eying him nervously. "Right now, we're kind of just winging it at this point."

"Hiccup, I swear to the gods-"

He's off before I can finish my threat and I glare at his lightning fast form. There's no way I can keep up with him and I don't try. I jump when a few fire blasts explode around me. Some are bright, scorching orange fire, some are spiraling with tornado-like fury, and some are blue with devastating force. One nearly hits me and I

screech to a halt, catching my breath. I'm definitely more coordinated on the ground but I'm determined not to get hit by a stray fire blast. A shadow flickers across the clouds, one with a small frame and four, enormous wings. I narrow my eyes, staring down at my palms.

\_Think fire.\_

It should be surprising that it's so easy for me to throw my hands out and practically white fire comes pouring out from them in an array of sparks, it should be surprising when I hear a pained thunder of a cry ring through my ears, no, what I'm most surprised about is that, when the flames die off, my hands actually \_hurt \_because they were \_really, really hot.\_

Looking down, my hands are red and nearly blistered. I cringe and make a mental note not to fire excessively. What's my shot limit? I can't even remember but I doubt I'd even make it to it before my hands turned raw. Is this normal?

I don't have time to wonder any more, a vicious round of snarls and growling and clashing of wings beating against each other distract me and something tugs me a ways to the right. I know it's purely awful and terrifying that the two Dragons- one of them being my friend!- are practically trying to kill each other (even though Hiccup stated that he wouldn't be able to), the only word that comes to my mind as they battle is epic. And it really is. Hiccup, this puny, scrawny little black lizard is full-out brawling with this gigantic beast of a Dragon and it's a fight to remember.

Between the growls, I can suddenly catch a few audible sentences.

"Don't-you-dare!" That one's Hiccup, obviously. "Leave...out of this."

"...course. You think you can go...leave all that you are behind?" Valka spits at him. It is then that I try to shoot a few spikes at them but the Dragon Queen must have gained wisdom as she stops her wings to fall a bit before attacking Hiccup once more, missing the spiked missiles.

"She didn't...you, this is between you andâ€¦" Hiccup shouts, clawing at her face and curling his lips back in a vicious snarl.

His claws catch a patch of skin on her face, drawing fresh, scarlet blood. Her eyes widen in a bit of shock, but she quickly narrows them once again, glaring at Hiccup with a hatred that should never belong in a mother's eyes, no matter the species.

"You think you're so grand," her words are suddenly very clear and I pick up everything she speaks. "You think you can tell me to leave all that you care about out of this? Does she even know the truth? She would be \_ashamed. \_You do not belong in the same rank let alone world. You think you can protect her from \_me? \_Just watch, you hiccup of a Night Fury, let me show you just how wrong you are."

Suddenly, her interest in Hiccup is gone and she darts away from him, using his body as a launching pad and shooting him back a bit,



causing him to clutch his stomach trying to catch a breath. For once, I'm more focused on the Dragon Queen because, this time, her focus is right on...me.

Before I can even lift my arms in hope of escape, she has one clawed hand gripped around my throat and is rocketing straight up in a vertical line. I gasp for air but none comes to my lungs and I panic, thrashing around with my tail hackled up and swinging around in attempt to maybe catch her but her death grip is too strong.

"Astri-id!" Hiccup shouts in fear from below, but I can hear in his voice that he's winded. Oh no, what if he's injured-

My thought gets cut off as I have another coughing fit but I still have no access to fresh air. Just as my vision starts to turn fuzzy, the claws are gone and I can't even grasp my neck because I have to fly. I can feel it's wet, though, and not just from the condensated clouds. Her claws have drawn blood. Awesome, I really hope that's not a dangerous place to get one or two or ten cuts.

I choke out a breath and suck in as much air as I can. The air is thinner up here and I'm wondering how high she took me since I hadn't been able to fully compensate. My wings feel heavy, much too heavy. Where did the Dragon Queen go?

My scream echos in the clouds around me as a brilliant torrent of fire centers its aim at my back. Luckily, it only lasts a second or two and I hear two beats of large wings swooping away. I get a fleeting fear of a feeling of dread. I can't face the Dragon Queen on my own! In a face off, who would win; the great and highly experienced Alpha species Bonded with two Dragons and who is literally called the Dragon Queen, or little Deadly Nadder me, Viking warrior Bonded not twenty minutes ago? As much as I hate to admit, she would win any day over me. I have no advantages over her.

My depressing thoughts are cut off as another scorching blast of fire is sent missiling by my head. My newly found instincts are the only thing that enables me to slap my wings to my side and plummet a few feet, narrowly escaping another hit. I can't really see behind me, but I can feel the skin starting to smolder and perhaps blister. It's almost as bad as my hands.

"You pathetic, worthless Nadder," the Dragon Queen soars straight at me and shoves me with her two clawed hands, sending me sprawling backwards into the air. Once I find my balance, I narrow my eyes at her and growl.

"I'm not pathetic, or worthless," I retort. "And if you want me dead, why am I still breathing?"

"Because I want your end to be filled with suffering. I want to show you what happens when you cross a Dragon such as \_me.\_ How is it that such a puny little creature can thwart my plans, causing me to start from scratch all over again? You're a simple-minded Viking halfling and yet you have single handedly cost me my most valuable player."

"Hiccup isn't some game piece," my voice rings out with a fury I hadn't even known I could possess. The Dragon Queen's eyes spark with

hatred and she raises her hands, but I think quick and beat her to it, throwing a blast of magnesium flames her way, followed immediately by several well-aimed spikes. I can't see through the smoke of my fire but I know at least one of spikes have hit their target as she roars in momentary agony. The poison residing in my spikes aren't enough to kill her, but they can certainly wound her.

The smoke clears and she comes hurtling towards me with incredible speed. I dart to the side and hurl another ball of fire blindly. It's met with one of her own and the fire collide in a dazzling display of sparks.

"Hiccup's your son and you're hurting him, can't you see that? Don't you care?" I call out to the clouds and smoke surrounding me, unsure of where she is.

"He is no son of mine," she hisses as she swiftly drops from above, catching my shoulders with her claws and thrusting me downwards. Her eyes are wild and deranged, nothing of any creature I've seen before. "He is a disgrace to Dragonkind and deserves no place among my ranks."

I'm grasping her hands, desperately trying to throw her off as they draw blood. I'm so hyped with adrenaline I barely notice the pain, but I know there's an awfully large amount of blood spouting from my shoulders and if she doesn't remove them soon so I can hopefully heal I'm going to run into some trouble. Well, more so than I've already met, that is.

I struggle to choke out, "He wouldn't want one anyway."

She finally releases me and I stretch my wings to catch my fall, quickly beating them so I soar upwards once more. For a moment, we hover in a clearing, just glaring into each other's eyes. I think of all the moments Hiccup has had with her, of the woman she used to be. Valka Haddock was a woman who cared about others, who took her son so that he would have a chance to grow up. She must have known he would Turn, how could she not have? I wonder how many times she looked at Hiccup with love as opposed to hatred, how many times she saw him as something to be proud of rather than something to be ashamed of. But why is she so ashamed?

I ask her so myself. "Hiccup has done nothing to you but love you. Why can't you take back control because of this? Doesn't he matter to you?"

For the first time, the Dragon Queen looks utterly confused. "What are you speaking of?" she hisses, but I keep talking.

"I know you're still in there, and I know you're fighting, but it's not good enough. Valka, you have to fight harder, Hiccup's still in danger because of you!"

The Dragon Queen screams in fury, lashing out with the hottest fire she can produce. I am only just able to avoid it, and even still I think a bit of my wings get singed. "How dare you address me by that weakling name!"

I gaze into her eyes, desperately searching for something- anything-

to show that there's hope. That the real Valka is in there and fighting back. Her yellow eyes glare at me with slit pupils and I can find nothing. I think of how Hiccup still loves her, despite all the things she has done to him. Because she is his mother, he cannot kill her. I know this, I know his reasonings, and I respect them. But I can't allow us to die because of them. If there's a chance one of us can survive, I'm going to make sure it's him. She is still his mother who raised him and loved him at one point in time, and the bond between mother and child remains strong, even after one has been destroyed. Because of this, he cannot kill the Dragon Queen.

But I can.

I'm sorry, Hiccup, I briefly close my eyes in regret. He had been willing to sacrifice himself, but could not because it meant that his mother would die. I know he'll be sad, but it's better than being dead. I'm not sorry for what I'm about to do because there is no possible way the Dragon Queen can survive without posing a threat to everything I have come to cherish, I am sorry that I will be taking away the one thing Hiccup truly loves.

He will miss his mother, but everyone will be safe. And if I have to sacrifice myself in order to achieve peace, I believe it is well worth it. People might miss me, but they will certainly survive as they've been doing it for hundreds of years already. It's the one thing Vikings and Dragons will ever have in common.

"Hiccup is not in danger because of me, that is all your doing!" the Dragon Queen's roar brings me back to reality, and I can no longer gaze upon her with spite. All I feel now is pity, because whether I like it or not, Valka has still died, and this is the remainder.

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"You don't even know," she laughs maliciously and I narrow my eyes, swinging my tail to shoot a few spikes at her. She dodges them easily. "You stupid Viking."

"It's stupid half-Viking," I correct. Let's see, my fire is hot to burn my hands and scorch a bit of her wings, it should be enough to spark an explosion big enough. I can only hope that Hiccup is still somewhere down below, or at least covered in the clouds.

I need the Dragon Queen to give me a large enough amount of fuel.

"I am no fool," I taunt to empty air, "you are the one who will prove to be useless and weak. You cannot control us any longer. Face it, Valka, it's over."

"It is far from over," she growls, bursting through the clouds and smoke to hover right in front of me with an evil glint in her eyes.

"But it is," I tell her. "You have played right into our trap and it's too late to change it."

"I will not be bested by a halfling," the fire begins to grow in her hands as she summons the largest amount of fire she can muster. I keep my eye on it, knowing that my one and only chance is rapidly

approaching. "I will enjoy every last second destroying you."

"Why do you hate me so much? I have done nothing but struggle and merely exist- why is my pain not good enough for you?" I rage as sparks begin to crackle and pop from my fingertips.

"Because you have ruined everything!" she screeches. "My Night Fury should be at my side right now, but because of you he is an outcast, a weakling!"

"Having someone you can trust is not weak," I say back. The gas is billowing out from her hands, now, almost obscuring the detail of her snarling countenance.

"Don't you see?" she growls, catching me by surprise. See what? She senses my confusion and hesitation and she smirks in pleasure. "Honestly, why do you think the Dragon has been trying to make you angry at him this whole fight? Whose safety do you think he's protecting? Why do you think he stepped in front of you on the boat?"

Things start making sense, and I don't want them to because I'm about to die.

"No, you're wrong!" I shout, desperate for her to stop talking. I need to focus on the fireball, the explosion, I need-

"Do you really think that tail broke itself?"

"Shut up- stop talking!" I shriek. I want to cover my ears, block out her voice, but I can't because if I stop flapping I'll fall.

"Your suffering causes me great pleasure," she says simply, raising her hands. I take in shallow breaths, recovering just enough to recognize that this is the moment.

Her entire demeanor changes, and I know that this is it. This is what it's come to; this is the end- where it is truly over. I harden my gaze, staring my fate in the face with unflinching courage. I am no longer afraid. Maybe, when you're about to die and you know it, acceptance is the only thing you can muster, and it chases fear from your mind. I growl, a low rumble that builds from the back of my throat I know can't possibly be anything of human nature. It's the cry of a Deadly Nadder. At the very least, I think, I will die in my true form. I will die as Astrid Hofferson, for I know who that truly is now; once a warrior, always a warrior. And Dragon or Viking, I will always go down fighting.

My eyes focus on her form beneath me as I beat my wings to rise above her, daring her to fire at me. My arms are alight with the white hot fire, crackling and hissing with power and heat. The flames seemingly set my flesh alight but I do not feel the pain. And even if I did, it would be minor to what is sure to come. Pointed teeth dig into the corners of my mouth, drawing fresh blood as I snarl at the Dragon below me. Her hands continue to charge her blast, and I can only hope it will be enough.

"Here I am, ungodly beast- fearless Astrid Hofferson!" I shout, enunciating every word clearly as if they are my last. Which, thinking about it, they probably are. I take one deep breath, staring

her right in the eyes. "Come and get me- \_if you dare\_."

She doesn't shoot. Why isn't she shooting? Instead, the Dragon Queen smiles as if she knows something I don't.

"I don't understand why he is so eager to protect you," she says, practically speaking to herself. The charge of fire is still raised above her head, but she had yet to release it. "He thinks \_I\_ am the largest danger to all that he loves, when really, it is you that poses the greatest threat to him in all the world."

I don't say anything, afraid she will continue. It's back to when she talks about Hiccup, and I can't have that because he makes me want to live. I need him as far away as possible- I am sacrificing everything for his safety and she is handing me information I don't want.

But I can't help but inquire, "Why am I such a danger to him?"

The Dragon Queen smiles. It's really more of a sneer. The fire in her hands grows to an immense size and I blink.

\_Hold, Astridâ€|\_

"Because he's in love with you," she snarls, and releases her flame at the exact moment I release mine.

\* \* \*

><p>There's an old saying, and I can't quite recall where it originates from, all I know is that it's always been around; sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt. I like to think that I'm not easily affected by the things others say to or about me, that I can remain strong and tall throughout any rude comment or snide remark. Words have never brought me down because what can they honestly do to you? They can't physically hurt you.<p>

But in this instant, I know that I am wrong. Words are the most dangerous weapon of all, and will always be sharper than any blade because they can tear you apart from the inside out. They can make you strong and determined or render you utterly defenseless and there's nothing you can do about it because that's what they're \_meant\_ for.

I think I might have been able to put together the last blow the Dragon Queen strikes me with, eventually, but all the same they come as one of the most unexpected impact of all time.

She could be lying. The prospect has never even occurred to me because it's just so shocking- who would honestly be in love with \_me\_? I'm cold hearted, I push everyone away, and sure, I have my place among Vikings- or, thought I did- but even they deserve so much better. It would be easy for her to say that just to throw me off, but it's too late. I can't think because one second is a simultaneous act of far too little time, and far too much. There's no time to think, there's only just enough to react.

My entire being is suddenly thrown into chaos as my mind screams, \_Wait, what?\_

It takes all but the blink of an eye for the explosion to ring through my ears and I am aware of my body being hurled upwards as the breath is knocked out of me, but all I hear is one singular cry ringing through the air;

"\_Astrid!\_"

\* \* \*

><p>The blast of heat is the first thing to register in my mind. It's so <em>hot<em>. I know the searing flames had been uncomfortable not a moment ago but had it always felt this smelting? I cough, bringing tears to my eyes as the smoke invades them, and I can't even bring myself to claw for anything to grasp as I feel myself falling.

"Watch out!" calls out a familiar voice and suddenly I don't feel like I'm about to melt from overheating. My arm is now held in the tight grasp of someone's hand. I look up and am met with deep green eyes, with catlike pupils dilated to show their concern. \_Concern. \_For me. Ha, this must be an illusion- I must already be at the gates of Helheim for that is surely where I deserve to go.

"Hiccup?" I croak. It hurts to talk.

"Don't worry, I've got you, Stormy," he smiles. I furrow my brow, not being able to do much else. My head is spinning and I can't concentrate on anything. There's fire everywhere.

Suddenly, my body is jerked and twisted around and Hiccup is no longer there. I'm falling once again but I can't register it. Darkness is seeping into my vision and I struggle to fight unconsciousness. It's too much, and as my vision fades, my mind is suddenly thriving with the alertness my body cannot produce.

'\_Honestly, why do you think the Dragon has been trying to make you angry at him this whole fight? Whose safety do you think he's protecting? Why do you think he stepped in front of you on the boat?\_'\_

So that's why he had been so cold to me. He was trying to make me angry with him so I would leave, ensuring my safety from the hoard of Dragons. What a stupid idea. Did he really believe me to be so un-stubborn? Is that even a word? Does it matter? He had stepped not \_in front of\_ the Dragon Queen- but \_towards\_ me.

Orange is the color of fire, and it surrounds the ground beneath me as gravity takes its toll. Somehow, Hiccup got below me, and he is falling. I can just barely make out his eyelids fluttering, fighting the same battle of sleep I am.

'\_Do you \_really \_think that tail broke itself?\_'\_

I knew that it had seemed suspicious. The disk had been broken just enough so that he could continue to fly, but that it would still cause a big enough problem to fix. He didn't really need my help, I'm willing to bet Hiccup learned the mechanics all on his own and could have fixed it all on his own. But he still broke it, pretending to still have little control over his human qualities. Why? So he had an

excuse to \_come back.\_

Hiccup isn't stretching out his wings to catch his fall. A cackling sound echoes in my ear, coming from my throat. It's definitely a Deadly Nadder sound. Hiccup isn't protecting himself, he'll die!

His tail isn't there. The brown material has been singed away sometime between catching me and falling, and the scraps of metal running down his leg and hanging from his waist are all that remain. I don't know if the Dragon Queen is dead or not, I didn't exactly have the time or the mind to check.

\_I'm sorry that I couldn't save your mother, \_I call to Hiccup in my mind. \_I'm sorry I couldn't find another way. You're not a useless half-reptile. Far from it, really. \_ I know he had originally intended to die. I had, too, now that I'm sure I'm not dead- not yet, at least. I had risked it all so that Hiccup could live. But why would he? Why would he go through such great lengths to try and save us?

'\_Because he's in love with you.'\_

I will not let him die. Not after all this. I shake my head and \_force\_ my body to wake up, tipping my position so that my head is pointed downwards and I focus my gaze on Hiccup's form, flapping as fast as I can because the wall of fire is quickly approaching and only our Dragon components are truly fireproof.

I quickly latch onto him, wrapping my legs around his midriff because I need my arms to fly, and madly beat my wings, trying to lift us into the air. For some reason, the air does not support me and we continue to fly. It's no use. My wings aren't working, but I can see no fault in them. We continue to fall, and I swear, before my very eyes my wings begin to fade, receding back into my arms until my scales are gone and I am only human.

I curse the gods, tears shamelessly leaking from my eyes because the Dragon Queen, in her last moments of power, must have used the last of her strength to ensure that she would not die in vain- that she would go down, taking us with her.

I give up trying to Bond again, once more accepting my fate. I had done it once before, now is not any different. Only, it is, because at least before I knew that Hiccup would be safe. I close my eyes and unravel my legs, replacing them with my arms- my wingless, useless arms- burying my face in his chest as we fall.

For now, it's okay that our chances of survival are bleak and pretty much nonexistent. It's enough to have my best friend in my arms as we plummet to our imminent deaths. The world goes dark around me, but not because I pass out. Hiccup, even in his unconscious state and though I don't particularly need it, offers me safety in the greatest amount he can give. He still wants to protect me. For the first- and I swear right then and there, the last- time, I close my eyes and let him.

Because I did promise him that he would never be alone, and I really, truly, meant it.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Well, this one's a long one, I'll say thatâ€| Anywho, sorry for the rushed ending, it's supposed to sound like she's in a daze and I know it didn't really sound like her butâ€| you knowâ€| Yeah.<strong>

**\*\*I can't believe it, only two more chapters left!\*\***

### 23. How To See The Aftermath

\_Thud.\_

\_Ow.\_

Breathing hurts. Why does it hurt so gods-damn bad?

\_Come on Astrid, focus. Focusing is good, just relax, in two three, out two three.\_ \_Freaking Hell this hurts.\_

I don't think I have a collapsed lung or a broken rib, it doesn't hurt in that way, and besides, I'm much stronger now so it's a miracle I even survived the fall. Waitâ€|

\_The fall. What fall? Um, come on, think, thinkâ€| I was falling because, um, dazed? I'm so stupid, I shouldn't have gotten dazed, I could have flown away! Instead of falling headfirst to protect-\_

\_Thud.\_

\_Hiccup.\_

My sight remains stubbornly dark, I can't seem to remember how to open my eyes. Pain is everywhere but I need to push through it. I would love to say that I've been through worse, but, uh, nope, I think this tops it. Did he do it? Is the Dragon Queen gone? What about- wait. I had tried to lift us to safety, but then my Dragon left me, and then he had wrapped his wings around us, and then we fell, and I think I blacked out then. If so, where is he nowâ€|?

\_Open right now, stupid eyelids!\_ I command, and much to my surprise (and pain, but let's worry about that later), light comes pouring into my vision, searing my mind. Once they can stand to be cracked about a millimeter apart without my head pleading for darkness again, I try to open my eyes a bit more. It's...darker than I originally thought. Maybe it's because I've been blacked out that it seemed so blinding. But really, there are still a good amount of grey clouds above and there's bits and pieces of ash debris floating to the ground. It's eerily quiet, which allows my head to clear a bit more.

"I'm- I'm so sorry," a voice, a bit muffled but still piercing into my ears, speaks, sounding choked up and ready to break down.

\_Thud thud.\_

So I'm not deaf, that's a plus. With as little movement as I can, I try to peer out into the grey void to locate the owner of the voice,



and, much to my pleasure, my head happens to be turned just so that I can see a rather large figure kneeling to the ground, their head hung low in defeat. My mind registers the person as Stoick the Vast, chief of the tribe. My tribe.

\_Thud thud, thud thud.\_

What is that noise? It's a constant yet erratic rhythm that I can't seem to place. And it's really loud.

\_Thud thud, thud.\_

No matter, I need to get up. Be strong, for if ever there was a time for me to need my strength, now is the time. I find my arms weak and stuck to the ground. No, not by the ground, by something. Furthermore, some\_one.\_

"So very...very-" Stoick's voice chokes off, and I blink my eyes, forcing them to open all the way.

Hiccup. That's who's beneath me. He's definitely out cold with his wings splayed across the ground and me sprawled on top of him with my arms- my wingless, useless arms- wrapped tightly around his chest, protecting the most of his midriff. His own wings must be what really saved us. Either way, they don't have the strength to be wrapped up anymore. He probably looks dead. \_I\_ probably look dead.

\_Thud thud, thud thud, thud thud. \_

My ear is pressed tightly into his chest, and I can't help it when my spirits soar because I finally realize it's a-

"Heartbeat," I croak. I inwardly cringe at the sound of my voice because it sounds like a granite rock rubbing against my vocal chords. I can hear the gasps of several Vikings as they realize that I'm awake now and very much alive. Stoick's head goes shooting up with a pleased yet questioning gaze. I slowly pull my arms out from beneath the scrawny frame beneath me and ever so slowly roll off of the scrawny little Night Fury who just saved my life. Gobber and Stoick come rushing to meet me and they help me to sit up. I only go through a brief period of a coughing spasm before I can gather up the energy to choke out, "I can hear his heartbeat."

"Hiccup?" Stoick asks in amazement and I can't help but start a bit because Hiccup's name on Stoick's lips might just be the strangest thing I've ever heard. I nod once, which is all I can manage before leaning over and coughing out what little air I have. Gobber rubs my back while Stoick quickly removes his helmet, carelessly casting it aside before crouching down to place his own ear against his son's chest. A Dragon's chest. Stoick is actually caring for a Dragon. I know he's his son and he thought he was dead but it's still progress.

Stoick suddenly cries out in joy, making me jump. "He's alive," he confirms, cheering breathlessly. "You got him out alive!"

I want to argue with him. I didn't do anything. \_Hiccup's \_the one whose wings prevented us from being burned to a crisp. What did I do that was so great? I want to say all these things, but I can't because my throat is telling me that I'm going to hurl and even

though I don't I still feel sick to my stomach.

"Astrid, you did it," Gobber mutters in my ear as I bend over, clutching my stomach. "You two really did it."

\_No, \_I think, \_I only got him back in the air. By far, it is Hiccup who saved my life.\_

And indeed, it is. I'm the one who shot him down, but he taught me about Dragons. He made me see that there's a life beyond Bonding. He opened my eyes to the concept that my world doesn't have to mine and mine alone, and that that's not a bad or scary thing. It's okay to open up to people because they just might change your life. Wow, I am really emotional when I'm past a near death experience- note to self, never go through this again. I will not vomit, I swear.

"...Well, most of him."

I've seen a lot of messed up things throughout my life. From bloody Viking bodies brought back from the battlefield to one singular Dragon forcing a whole colony of others to do her bidding, I have found that I can stomach a lot. I mean, I have to be tough, be able to see a lot of things without losing my mind, right? That's just a given. But right now, I don't care about all of those things because in the next instant, I see \_it \_and I don't hesitate before any and all contents in my stomach are most certainly not in my stomach anymore.

How is this, in the gods' minds, fair? How can this be right? It can't. It just doesn't make sense. Why Hiccup? He's never done anything to deserve this, he's a good person- Dragon- I don't know. This is all my fault. There is no way that anyone will be able to heal that without having to

I want to force it out of my mind. I want to erase it from my memory and unsee it. But I don't. Not because I can't, but because I \_won't. \_This is my doing. \_I \_deserve to be sick with the sight of it, with the very thought of it.

The lower half of Hiccup's left leg is red. The very tips are black, but the rest is blistered and puffing in the most unnatural way and there's this weird liquid oozing out from where the blisters have popped open. There's the faintest hint of smoke still curling off of it and dispersing in the air. What remains of his foot is ripped and torn in shreds, though I don't even know how it's possible for a fire to do that. The ends are black and now that I notice it, the air reeks of what I now know is \_burning flesh. \_I'm going to be sick again.

Most of his calf is split open as well. I think I can even detect the white color of bone. Snapped tendons, charred skin, the bubbling liquid of a little bit of fat burned off, raw and blistered skin with burns spiraling his leg- I'm no healer but, by far, this is the worse wound I have ever laid eyes on and it makes me want to vomit again. And this time, I would have, but there's nothing left for me to throw up.

"Oh my gods," I breathe.

"He's alive, Astrid," Gobber reminds me.

"Aye, that he is," Stoick comes over to join me kneeling in the pebbles of the beach and the large blonde Viking next to me, "but I fear the worse has yet to come. Astrid, can you get him back?"

"I- I don't... " I shut my eyes, feeling the vile threat of vomit fill my mouth once again, but there's nothing there. \_Breathe. This is happening. You can get through this, Astrid. \_"So you not see? I'm not a Dragon anymore. She took my wings away. And the teens led the other Dragons away. Is there a ship still intact or one we can fix up quickly?"

Stoick quickly shouts for someone to check and a small group breaks away from the crowd to run to the water. It takes a few minutes for someone to come back and call out that there's one with some repairs needed but it could be ready within the next hour.

Time can truly be a funny thing. The next hour feels like years because I am literally watching Hiccup's life drain out from his leg while we desperately try to stop it. It's so stupid because the worst part should be over but it isn't for him. He has to go through a whole different battle and it's not fair because I can't help him through it. I am so completely and utterly \_useless.\_

Finally, finally, someone unfamiliar comes up to inform Stoick that the boat is seaworthy and Vikings can load. All the ones injured to a potentially fatal state are brought on first, Hiccup included in that category. A good lot of them stare bug-eyed at the injured Night Fury being loaded onto the boat with them but me, in my tired, crazed state, must scare them from protesting. Gobber is included among the crowd on the first shipment due to his rare ability of being able to understand the village elder, and I can see that Stoick wants to come- very, very badly, but he refrains, claiming he needs to be on the last boat. He wants to make sure every Viking leaves this island like the good chief he is.

"Go with him?" he asks me, practically pleading, practically childish. He sounds so small and it's just strange because he's this large burly man with no fear and yet he's terrified for the life of his Dragon son. I nod, though he really needn't have asked.

"Astrid," Stoick calls out right before I turn to limp away (as my left ankle must have been sprained; it hurts a whole lot to walk on it). I look up at him and he stares at me with a peculiar expression. Eventually, he stutters, "Y-you're not a Dragon anymore-"

"I don't really want to talk about it," I have the nerve to say. I turn and bound off. I've already been forced to make a choice that wasn't mine. This is it. But that doesn't mean that it still hurts to be reminded of all that I've given up.

I quickly hop aboard the boat as well, gaining a large number of stares, but they watched me fight off the Dragon Queen- for the most part, anyways- and they know me. Plus, I'm not threatening them, and even though they know that I had Turned into a Dragon before their very eyes, they don't bother me. Meanwhile, Hiccup lays on the deck of the boat and I feel bad because he really hates boats. Probably not very fond memories on one either, but there's no other option. And besides, like Stoick said, the worst probably has yet to

come.

Carefully, I lean down and brush aside a few knotted strands of hair from his ear to whisper, "I am so, so sorry." A cluster of moist water pools at the corners of my eyes but I bite them back. I can't cry for him just yet because that would be crying for me and I don't deserve it. His eyes are shut peacefully with his jaw just the slightest bit slacked. His face is littered with several different scars and burns that probably won't fade anytime soon. But other than that- and his leg, of course- he's fine.

For the first time since I've awoken, I worry about myself. Assessing the damage done to me, aside from my sprained ankle, I can tell that I have red cuts too numerous to count and several burn marks adorning my legs and arms, a particularly nasty one on my left forearm that will probably scar, a few cuts and grazes on my face but those aren't too bad, and my head is throbbing like crazy but I can focus. Most likely a concussion which I should really take more seriously but Hiccup's \_leg \_is torn to shreds, I think I can take it seriously when I'm dead.

During the majority of the wait time, I spend it carefully removing the scraps of metal residing along his side and tail. The actual fin is burned off and the invention is a useless heap of loose wires, gears, and strips, but I don't care about it. Hiccup is what's important, and I can always design another tailfin.

He survives the boat ride, thank the gods, but getting him up to Gothi is a whole nother matter. Barely anyone wants to touch him and I don't know where Asmund is so I'm left with myself and a couple Vikings I have to threaten to gain their help. Luckily, we don't have to carry him all the way \_up\_ to Gothi, and I don't even want to think about it if we end up having to.

As always, Gothi wordlessly moves with a graceful expertise to scan through his injuries. I want to protest when she begins to rub a salve on a burn in a different region from the oh-so-obvious one that needs attention, but I hold my tongue because she must know what she's doing. Or so I'm told from Gobber. Suddenly, she sets the salve down gently and makes some weird squiggle marks in the dirt. Hiccup is bleeding out, though!

Gobber observes carefully, rubbing his mustache between his thumb and forefinger. "Uh huh," he nods wisely. Then, turning to me, "Help me get him to the Great Hall."

It's another grueling act, but we manage with nearly the whole village's eyes. Once Hiccup is laying down on one of the tables with a cloth spread over it, Gobber faces me once again with a grim expression.

"You'll have to leave for this next part," he tells me.

"Next part?" I exclaim. "I'm not leaving!"

"Trust me, you don't want to be here for it. Where's Bucket and Spitelout? We'll need their strengthâ€¦" he murmurs the last part to himself and I'm struck with a wave of fear. It's new but I welcome it because I can fear for this. Why would theyâ€¦ Oh. To hold him down. Oh my gods.

I want to stay, I really do, but even I can't force myself to stay put and help them through the process. It's sickening and I just \_can't.\_

\_I'm sorry, Hiccup, \_I apologize in my mind. I swore I wouldn't leave him but I just can't do this. I want to help, they could use me with my strength, but deep down I know that I would not be able to watch. I can just see him, held down by Vikings, desperate to escape and screaming from the pain...

I stumble out of the giant doors, gasping for breath. I squeeze my eyes shut as tightly as I can but the image is still there. My body musters some fluid for me to choke out of my body and into the nearest bush and my stomach contracts painfully with the effort. I'm not even the one going through this and I can't help but feel sick and terrified. At the very least, he's unconscious.

Apparently, that doesn't change the fact that it still hurts, because it's not a few seconds later that the screams begin.

It's a wonder I can still stand on my own two feet while it happens (because I owe it to him to stick nearby at the very least). Actually, I don't stand on my own, I prop my back and head against the outside of the Great Hall while every shriek from Hiccup's mouth strikes me like a hammer. I can't imagine the pain he must be going through, and I can't say that I want to. Mainly, though, while he screams, aside from the pain, I'm just drowning in guilt. For one, I'm the one who's responsible. Of course it's my fault, and I don't think I'll ever be able to get past that. But there's this large part of me that feels relieved- relieved because \_I'm \_not the one that has to go through this. And that sucks. A lot. If I could take away his pain, of course I would. In a heartbeat. But that doesn't change the fact that I'm still relieved it's someone else and not me.

I'm the most despicable human being in the world.

I don't know when I start crying, but it suddenly hits me that my face is streaming with silent tears as I weep for the pain my best friend is feeling. I'm not even bothered by the fact that I'm crying, because I can give all the tears in the world for Hiccup right now. It actually feels \_good \_to cry and it's not long before I'm sobbing. It doesn't matter what I do, whether I'm trying to kill him or save him, he still gets brutally maimed in some way.

For a while, my eyes are just tightly shut while I take in every agonized whimper and every excruciatingly arduous scream. After that, I just stare blankly at the sky, my arms folded over my stomach and praying to the gods that he'll make it.

\_Please, \_I voice within my thoughts. \_Forget anything I've ever wanted and never gotten, I will trade everything just for his life. Please let him live.\_

\* \* \*

><p>He's going to make it.<p>

It's a slightly bleak and hopeful chance, but it's definitely a chance.

\* \* \*

><p>It's been three days and people are passing recovery of everything that's happened. The damage had been costly, lots of Vikings had been killed, but we'll survive. We always do. One of the biggest changes is that Eret hadn't been found after everyone had gotten out, so he's no longer here. His loss had been mourned because he was a youth near his prime, a Viking filled with potential, and I'm sorry that his life had been among the things we had to pay to win the Dragons' freedom and peace.<p>

Asmund and the other teens had shown up not long after...everything died down. Most of the Dragons had simply kept flying but a few had gotten it in their minds that the Vikings were now safe and they had returned alongside the little group. Stoick had let them reside in the woods, and the few that wanted to in the village. He's decided that perhaps Dragons aren't so bad after all. Which is good, definitely good. It'll be a while before people truly accept it, but baby steps. That's all I'm aware of. I kind of snuck out the back ways through the village to get here. I've been by Hiccup's side this entire time, excluding now, of course, so I'm not really up to date on what's going on. Asmund's visited me a couple times, Gobber brings me meals, Stoick sometimes comes and sits with me on my vigil, but that's about it.

I want to be there when he wakes up, but I can't stand the reeking odor of near death that fills Stoick's living room where Hiccup is. So, here I am, out in the cove where this all began. Okay, technically, that's all a lie. It really started back in that clearing when Hiccup had first attacked me, but this is where all of our memories are. This is where everything \_truly\_ began.

There's a bird perched on the tree that I'm sitting in. I had climbed up into it a couple hours ago and was just sitting there, minding my own business with my thoughts when a small bluebird decided to show up. She's really quite a pretty thing, with a chest of white-grey feathers ruffled up in the slight breeze and a coating of blue ones around her head, back, wings, and tail. It's strange that she just came and perched right beside me. Normally, birds would not even consider perching near a human, but for some reason, I'm recognized as an asset of nature and treated as such. It's strange, really.

She chirps merrily, gifting me with a few notes of a song before she lifts off, flying away. I watch her go with the slightest bit of animosity. I wonder for a moment if that's the same little bird that Hiccup had stared at when he was trapped here. I remember I had found it amusing, the look he gave it as it flew away, but now I understand it all too well. That little bird has something I (and, at the time, he) will never have again; flight.

I don't know who has it worse, to be honest; Hiccup or me. I know that sounds terrible because I've crippled him and I've rendered his one leg useless for the rest of his life, but once we get him a new prosthetic, he'll be able to fly again. Heck, he might even be able to walk again, but I can't belong in the same world as him. What Dragon in their right mind would want to be tied to someone like me? I'm just as crippled, if not more, because no matter what invention someone can come up with, there's nothing that will ever make me fly again.

Why? I hadn't brought my new ax but now I wish I did because I would totally go train some. Penetrating some trees sounds really good right now because it's \_something \_I can do. But why does this have to happen? I know that everything is over, and perhaps a small part of me hoped my Dragon would come back, not even so much as a scale has surfaced, and I'm stuck a human being. I never thought I would ever be so despaired about this. I want to feel sorry for Hiccup, and I do, but the truth of the matter is that he'll be fine. Maybe not soon, but one day. I hate this.

It's not a good story and I'm definitely not a sap or anything but I had at least hoped for a happy ending, not some random disaster that ruins everything I've worked for. I don't have any ties to the Dragon world now, I'm just a human being. I know I said that I would be a fighter no matter what form I took on, but I can't help but want my other one back, the one that still lives inside me but cannot come out. I still long for the skies, for the feeling of the wind rushing through my hair and beneath my wings, but I can't have it.

And I'm drowning in self pity and anger worthy of the gods when Asmund comes swooping in, stuttering that they think Hiccup's waking up.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>I'm really sorry! My wifi went down last week and I was trying to finish chapter 2 (which I almost did...isn't posted yet, might be up later today). So I typed this up literally today so here you all go! Sorry for the unexplained wait.<strong>

\*\*So, uh, one more chapter. Wow. Yep, that's all I have to say...\*\*

## 24. How To Fly

\*\*I have made some minorly major changes to the plotline that will not make sense unless you read through them; they're at the end of Chapter 19, around the middle of 22, and a bit of editing in the previous chapter (22 is the biggest change, though).\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><em>Pull yourself together. Stop losing yourself, you're stronger than this.<em>

This, I have to remind myself as I walk back into Chief Stoick's living room. Right now is all about Hiccup. I realize that, in a way, it kind of always has been. It's not really my story, in the end. I've figured out who I am, for me, it's over. So I lost my battle. I Bonded. The end. And it doesn't even matter because I can't even fly but I've finally found somewhere where I belong, and I didn't know it before, but that's all I've ever really wanted. Then that place just about died, but it's okay because he's okay and I need to stop losing my mind. I've always been strong and I won't let something as stupid as my loss of my Dragon render me helpless.

Hiccup looks so frail, but no less than I remember him being a few hours ago. I want him to wake up so bad. His breathing is steady and

even, the only sign of constant life. There are several burns and cuts decorating his face, his mouth slightly ajar. There might be a trail of drool from his mouth but I'll be kind for once and not mention it. His eyelids flutter every now and then and I'm guessing that's what tipped them off to him waking up.

Slowly, I approach his bedside, settling myself down on my chair that resides right by his head. His wings curled around his body when he was first moved to Stoick's house, so even if the blankets didn't cover the wound, I wouldn't be able to see it. His tail, however, is another story and it flops off the end of the bed, coiled on the ground. The missing tailfin doesn't bother me as much, now. I know that he has something much worse to deal with. It's unfair that he receives both of these things. He's a cripple in both of his aspects and he won't ever be the same. 'Sorry' doesn't begin to describe the way I feel for him, I don't even know if he'd be able to make it through this if he had been merely human. The Night Fury is the most feared species of Dragon among the Vikings and though I have a hard time seeing him as the offspring of lightning and death anymore, I have a feeling that his Dragon components probably helped hold him together and keep his heart pumping blood.

Then again, maybe not. After all, it was Hiccup in the first place who Bonded with a Night Fury. Not anyone's soul could hold that.

"Hiccup," I speak- croak, more like- surprising myself at the sound of my voice. This entire time it's been nothing but silence from my mouth. I breathe in deeply and continue on a whim. "Hey. It's me. Um, Berk's been doing fine, I guess. I don't really know since I've been here with you this whole time."

He doesn't respond, not that I really expect him to. I blow out through my mouth and tap my fingers on the wooden frame of the bed. Still nothing.

"Come on, Hiccup," I say, "it's time to wake up now. You're one of us now, and you're going to help us unite the Dragons and the Vikings. They need you out there." Pause. Hiccup stirs, and I lean over, resting my chin on my folded arms.

Ever so slowly, his eyelids peel open, heavy with three days of sleep and weak with the effort he's been through lately just to keep breathing. So what if there's this stupid grin sprawled across my face? I don't even think I could pry it off if with my battle ax if I wanted to.

"Hey Astrid," he smiles, as if he hasn't been unconscious for the past thirty-six hours.

"You're alive," I announce thoughtlessly. I mean, he's awake and I'm happy, but that doesn't mean I'm all of a sudden gonna know how to deal with stupid conflicting feelings and emotions.

"Nice to see you, too," he chuckles, followed by a wince. He's quickly becoming aware that he's not in imminent danger nor remotely anywhere near the Dragon nest.

"The gods are punishing you for being sarcastic," I deadpan but he knows I'm smiling. That stupid half-reptile. Hiccup starts, furrowing



his brow and staring intently at me.

"What?" I snap.

"You- you're human," he says.

Oh. I look down, biting my lip. "The Dragon Queen's final parting gift," I explain.

"I- gods, Astrid, I'm so sorry," Hiccup remarks in a bewildered tone.

"It's okay. I've accepted it," I shrug. I really haven't, but he doesn't need to be tormented over it.

"Everything's changed," he says somberly.

"What does that mean?"

I look over to find the Dragon giving a totally characteristic and crooked smirk. "It means you're still a stupid half-human."

"Haha, you're hilarious, and you're still-"

"I-I'm in a house." he cuts me off and looks around stupidly.

"That would be correct." I huff, angry at being interrupted.

"\_You're \_in a house."

"I'm aware."

"W-whose house is this?" he questions warily. Slowly, he sits up, unfurling his wings and testing his limits. When he finds he has none, he stretches them out, knocking into the wall behind him and grimacing as it knocks the old helmet down with a loud clatter. "Whoops."

I kneel to pick it up and stride over to set it down by the fireplace, warily glancing at my apparent non-Dragon and very human eyes. They shouldn't bug me this much. "It's the chief's house," I respond absentmindedly, gingerly touching the area around my eyes. "I mean, whatever you want to call it is fine," I set it down and turn back to him without looking directly at him. "Technically speaking it's your dad's house, but, you knowâ€¦ your house works, too."

I brush my bangs out of my face, trying to catch a glimpse of his reaction in the corner of my eye. Does he even want to stay? I know we're all expecting him to help us with the Dragons now that we know they're not a threat and that the Dragon Queen is gone, but what if he wants to leave? Obviously we'd need to craft a new tail and a prosthetic, maybe even combine the two, I haven't really thought of it, and then he'd have to get used to it, but then there's the worry of-

"You mean... I can stay?" Hiccup asks shyly.

"If you don't want to you're welcome to leave," I snap, wincing at my tone of voice. I really need to work on this human- er, Dragon?-

interaction.

"Are... Are you staying?"

It takes me a moment to realize that his decision is going to be based off of mine, and when I do, I can't help but feel just the slightest bit flattered. Here's this amazing and powerful Dragon, crippled, yes, but still one of the most dangerous out there, and he cares about me. (And don't you dare tell him that, his head's big enough as it is.) It's not a feeling I'm used to, and yet... It's not entirely unpleasant. Actually, quite the opposite of unpleasant. But I think I'd rather die than admit that outloud.

"I mean," I choke out, toying with my hands. What am I doing? I never toy with my hands! I don't get embarrassed, either! "I know I said that we could go travel wherever, but, I like it here, this is my home, and I think now that the Dragons are welcome, it won't be too bad. Plus, um, I can't really travel on my own anyways-"

"Then it's my home, too," he says matter of factly, in an uncharacteristically bold way that I'm sure comes from his Night Fury side. I suppose it's my fault for mumbling the last part...

"Cool," I say simply.

An awkward silence follows, and I can't help but feel like I'm the one to blame. In the moments, I can't help but remember back to when I was thinking that I'd rather kiss Hiccup again than have him like how he had been. I'm not entirely sure why it pops into my head, but, for some reason, I don't mind the thought. Now, if you'll excuse me I'm going to go bang my head against a metal shield.

"I guess we'd better go face the crowd now," he says awkwardly.

"Oh..." Suddenly, it comes back to me, the reason he's been in this bed the whole time. He starts to get up and I quickly try to stop him. "Wait, Hiccup, don't-"

Too late. He shifts to the side and lifts his covers, able to see the damage done. I don't quite know how to perceive his gaze. His mouth is pressed into a thin line with his eyebrows matting together.

"Hiccup?" I ask cautiously, more to just let him know I'm there than anything.

His expression vanishes and he brings his feet- foot- to slide off the side of the bed. One right boot, and then the clang of metal of a prosthetic, ending right below his knee. Gobber must have been crafting one in his free time and attached it when I had been gone. It's a combination of wood and metal, the actual foot being a simple frame with the shin full of intricate workings that don't remind me all that differently from Hiccup's old prosthetic tail.

His breaths quicken and I hate to say it but he looks close to tears. All that water doesn't belong in his beautiful Dragon eyes. Don't comment, I know what you're thinking. But I don't like seeing him this close to an emotional breakdown. However, I've heard what's he's been through, literally, and as a soldier, I respect his strength. He

had to be pretty tough to get through this. Unfortunately, I'm not entirely sure whether or not the hard part is over.

"Hiccup, I'm- I'm so- this is all my fault," I stammer, but he ends my misery by shutting his eyes for a couple seconds, then opening them with a new and set determination.

"You did more than I could have. You did what I wasn't able to, and you got me out with my life. For that I thank you."

"Yeah, well, you're not the only one who came out scathed." He gives me a questioning look and I hold out my arm, reminding him of what I've lost. It should be nothing compared to him, but we both know that a downed Dragon is a dead one.

"I- oh, great Alphas, Astrid, I'm sorry," he looks down. He knows that I can't bring it back; if I haven't had any luck thus far what hope does the future bring? There won't be any prosthetics for me. But I'll survive. I always have. He knows that, too.

"We'll get through it. We will," I say, determined. He nods, pressing his lips together.

Shakily, he uses the bedpost to pull himself to his feet- \_foot\_, it's foot now- sucking in deep breaths. Once he figures he's strong enough, he squares his shoulders, stretches out his tail for balance, and takes a step. It's my reflexes that are able to catch him when he immediately stumbles.

"Um, thanks," he mutters, because the position that we're in with his arms flung across my shoulders and me supporting his whole weight isn't exactly graceful. Or comfortable.

"No problem. Good thing you've got me, I guess, huh Toothless?" I tease, maybe a tad bit awkwardly.

And as I help him hobble out on his new prosthetic foot, I realize that it's not the story of a Viking and a Dragon, it's not even the two sides of a war coming together. It's just me and Hiccup; two very different beings meeting somewhere in between and making it work against all odds. And that's the thing, we don't belong in each other's worlds. We probably won't ever. That's why we dared to be different, why we became friends in the first place, why we decided to make our own world to decide what's right and what's not. I've got two feet on the ground when I want to fly and Hiccup's only able to do what he's made to through a metal contraption. We make a funny duo, us two. The Dragon who belongs to the skies but walks the earth for the Viking who is stuck on the ground but dreams of her wings.

We near the door and I hear him say softly, "Good thing I've got you, Stormy."

For some odd reason, his words stifle me into silence. I don't want to say that it goes both ways, maybe because I don't have the courage to, but I can feel him smiling and I get the feeling he understands. I don't speak as we open the door- only to immediately close it as a Monstrous Nightmare snaps its jaws at us from outside.

We both slam it shut and stare side-eyed at each other, each asking

the other what in Odin's beard that was.

"Um, together?" he suggests, reaching for the knob with one hand.

I nod. "On three; one, two-"

We both say "Three" and we push the door open. The Nightmare is still outside... But so are a bunch of other Dragons. I'm not sure what the bigger surprise is, all of these Dragons, or that I recognize most of them.

"Snotlout?" I exclaim to the red Nightmare. Red like the one I killed... Nope, just gonna shut that one up right there. Nope, nope, nope, double nope.

Indeed, Snotlout's...charming grin greets us and he soars up the steps to meet us, his little Terrible Terror friend hanging onto the end of his snake-like tail.

"The Night Fury's up!" he shouts, and a chorus of cheers from the village follow it. Hiccup stares in astonishment and amazement at the village full of Vikings and Dragons, peacefully side by side.

"You Bonded," I blink. "What- how- when?"

"Yeah, most of us did after you two defeated the Dragon Queen," he says happily and full of pride. I do notice that his eyes are still the same blue. Strange. She must have focused solely on me, and not the rest of the Dragons. I wonder if the twins finally fully Bonded. Most likely, they have. Then, lifting his tail effortlessly, Snotlout says, "Oh, and this is Gustav; Gustav, Astrid and the Night Fury."

"His name's Hiccup," I inform him sourly as the newly dubbed 'Gustav' gives a series of clicks and clacks of his tongue, skittering up and down the length of Snotlout's tail. Who knew he actually could put up with all this... That anyone here could.

A small crowd soon forms around Hiccup and me, with Stoick approaching rapidly with a large grin. He looks happier than I ever remember him being. I do notice that he hasn't Bonded, though.

"Chief Stoick," I bow my head in respect and Hiccup is just about to say something when the large man claps him on the back and exclaims, "You're finally awake!"

Hiccup is still reeling from all the positive attention and he looks utterly in awe of everything around here. Since he's too flabbergasted to say anything, I ask for us both. "What happened around here?"

"Well, seems like Bonding isn't such a bad thing now. More Dragons are popping up everywhere and quite a number of our own have joined them. Only now, the Turned ones remember and the Bonded no longer have a reason to fight us," Stoick explains.

"It all makes sense," Hiccup says, as if to himself, though we all listen in. "She's not repelling away the parts that would remember, so now they can keep their memories."

I want to say something to Hiccup, but I don't know if he'll have the answer and I don't want to worry the others. If getting rid of the Dragon Queen is all it took for the Dragons to keep their memories through Bonding, why did they never remember before? Valka had once been a Hairy Hooligan; she hadn't always been a Dragon, and she hadn't always been the Dragon Queen. Dragons have always lost themselves to the beasts inside, so, what's changed?

Deciding against fretting about it and accepting that everything is good, I send a smile in Hiccup's direction. He returns it and his ear flaps swivel forwards in a happy gesture. Hiccup got his homecoming, a place to belong and be accepted by others for who he is and what he believes in, just what he's always wanted; a place to be free. It's more than what he ever hoped for, and it's written all over his face.

"A-Astri-id!" a stuttering squawk sounds loudly from the sky and I turn just in time to get bowled over by a very large and purple Deadly Nadder. Asmund's incredibly thick arms wrap around my shoulders, totally unphased by the spiked shoulder pads. I can't help but smile warmly and pat his back fondly.

"A-Astrid is o-okay?" he pulls back, concern on his face. I'm sure someone had told him how Hiccup and I had practically fallen into an explosion of flames and I quickly feel a strike of guilt for avoiding him and everyone else for the past few days, but I force it down. I had to be doing something else important.

"Yes, I'm fine," I reassure him.

"Told you we'd have your back through it all," Gobber comes up behind me and claps me on the back. Now, it doesn't sting, but it does send me rocketing forwards straight into Hiccup's chest, who fortunately catches me and helps me up, much to both our embarrassment.

"Yeah, I'll give you that," I answer Gobber, giving him a hard stare. I then spy a large bundle in his arms and I point to it. "What's that?"

"Well, we can't have a flightless Night Fury on our hands," he gives a toothy grin and I can't help but cringe. Yeah, it'd be really bad to have a flightless Dragonâ€¦ Hiccup gives me a look but I stare him down, silently demanding him to keep quiet. He turns his green gaze away in understanding, not saying anything about my inability to do anything in the skies with him.

Gobber dumps the pile in Hiccup's arms and he nearly staggers under the weight. He's strong so it's not the physical weight that causes shock, it's the mental one that brings him to realization that this is where he belongs, now. He gives the old blacksmith a bewildered look, like he can't believe a Viking simply came up to him and gave something to him without worry whatsoever. He better get used to thatâ€¦

"Well, try it on," Gobber tells him with a wave of his hook and a bemused expression. Hiccup turns to me, silently asking for help and I quickly oblige, making sure he doesn't hurt himself whilst getting it on over his new prosthetic.

"Fits perfectly," Hiccup shifts his tail around, carefully observing the contraption. It's different than the one he previously had. Gobber has pulled his genius mind through once again. This prosthetic doesn't go all the way up his tail, around his waist, and down his tail, it's simply a new tailfin, controlled by wires and gears synced to his remaining tailfin to mirror the movements it makes, allowing more freedom without the issues of gears. The fin is painted a bright red with a white skull on it which, for some odd reason, I find amusing, but for the most part, it's the same design of the tailfin as mine. Hiccup flaps his tailfin open and closed, and the prosthetic moves along with it with an audible sound of clicking gears shifting.

"What do you say, wanna test it out?" Stoick appears beside Hiccup, a foreign and unfamiliar emotion in his gaze. It's not hostile nor bad in any way, it's justâ€¦ different.

The crowd is suddenly pushing me out of the way, and though I'd normally protest, I don't feel like it this time. Hiccup's the hero who saved everyone, it's his time. Let the Night Fury fly above everyone else and lead us into a brand new future.

They don't need to know that it was actually the Nadder halfling who shot the final blow.

It's surprisingly easy to slip through all the burly Vikings and into the clear air, despite me heading in the opposite direction. People used to notice me a whole lot more because I was the the most successful Viking-in-training and my future was pretty much set. But now, with all the Dragons, my life isn't that much of an issue. And I'm perfectly fine with that. I think the attention might just break me, anyways. Solitary time is all I need to get over myself.

I smile to myself as I weave through the town. There are Dragons almost everywhere I turn. Monstrous Nightmares leaping into troughs of water after they accidentally set themselves on fire, Gronkles with a confused look on their face as they gnaw on a rock and find it quite enjoyable, Hideous Zipplebacks soaring clumsily through the air together, Terrors scurrying between huts; it's complete and utter chaos but it's the closest thing to peace we've ever had. Dragons and Vikings, living together in the same vicinity. Who would have thought? It's a dream come true, and I hadn't even known it was one in the first place.

It's a lot to take in, and I'm suddenly feeling just the slightest bit overwhelmed. Deciding to head into the woods, I take my leave, heading off in a steady but fast-paced gait. The trees blur in my vision but I don't care. I'm not really sad or anything, not like that at all. It just feels good to run with the air whistling in my ear. For the first time since- well, since I can remember, I feelâ€¦ content. Like, there's absolutely nothing I need to do. It's almost alarming because there's always going to be something, and I need to do, and I shouldn't feel so calm.

Without realizing it, I almost run off a cliff. Luckily, I become aware of my surroundings to stop myself, because Odin, that would have been embarrassing to survive an \_explosion\_ and die after having fallen off a cliff.

As I catch my breath, I realize that I recognize this place. It's

where Hiccup first learned to fly. I can't help but grin softly as I meander over to the stump. That stupid thing. I give it a good kick just to be sure.

"Now what did that stump do to you?" I hear Hiccup say. I turn around but I only see Asmund rising above the cliff face and landing.

"Hello Asmund," I greet, furrowing my brow. I could have sworn I'd heard-

"H-hi Astr-id," Asmund preens, carefully depositing a black Night Fury on the ground.

"Oh, I thought I heard you," I fold my arms and smirk just the tiniest bit. Why? Well, why ever not. Asmund gives me a wide, toothy grin before cackling and flying off in the direction of Berk. Well, there goes that Nadder.

"So, what are you doing here?" I ask, settling myself into a sitting position on the ground. Hiccup hops over and rests on the stump.

"Was wondering where you disappeared to. It's not very nice to leave a Dragon all alone with a horde of Vikings, you know."

I snort. "Come on, some of them were Dragons."

"Yeah, some of them wereâ€¦"

We both fade off, and I frown. Some of them are. Some of them will be. And some won't ever be. \_I \_won't ever beâ€¦

Hiccup grabs ahold of the stump and uses his wings to help force him to a standing position. Looking down at me as if sensing my sadness, he holds his hand out to me. I look up at him, a silent question adorning my face.

"Come on, Stormy. Let's go for a flight."

I raise my eyebrows.

"It'll be the first time I've flown in a while, too, you know," he adds. I wonder why he had asked Asmund to give him to ride to find me. I mean, I suppose with his new tail fin he could have flown himself, but instead asked the help of another. Obviously his prosthetic works fine, Gobber had invented it, after all, but still. It's confusing.

And I'm not so sure I want to go. It'll just remind me of all the things I'll never have again. Hiccup will be unsteady for a while but he'll be back on his wings in no time, whereas for me, I hadn't even known I was going to be saying goodbyeâ€¦

He must see the internal battle on my face, because he wraps his tail around the stump and leans down so he can pull me to my feet. "Don't worry. I won't let you fall," he reassures me, though we both know that's not what I'm worried about.

It takes a few tries for me to climb onto his back comfortably while

he supports my weight on his new foot, but eventually we get it and he stretches out his black wings, flapping them a few times so that we skyrocket into the air.

I had only known this on my own a total of two times, but Thor's hammer, did I miss this. I let loose a laugh as he slowly soars right beneath the clouds. It's a surprisingly warm day for the weather, and the sky is a light, natural blue as opposed to the typical grey. Perhaps the gods are smiling down on us, after all.

Closing my eyes, I stretch out my arms, allowing my hands to run through the clouds. Most people think they're soft based on appearances, and while I can't exactly say I've ever taken time away from my day to stop and ponder over what clouds feel like, they're really just the opposite. It feels like there's nothing there, though it's cold and when I retract my hands there's a thin layer of water running down my arms. Interesting.

My smile must say it all as Hiccup glances back at me, and I look down at him. I revel in the feeling of flight. It's incredible, even if I'm not doing it on my own. There must be a little bit of Dragon left in me, because it is cheering out its pleasure and my whole body is buzzing with energy. If I close my eyes, I can almost pretend that it is me flying. Although I know that my wings are attached to my arms, but if I just stretch them out, I can almost feel my pointed wings leaping from my skin to meet the wind, my long, spiked tail unfurling behind me, the weight added to my head as my crown of horns add decoration to my head. And I swear, it's as if I could push off Hiccup and fly on my own.

"Astrid!" a distant shouts, and my eyes snap open. I don't know how I am able to tell, but somehow, I just know. When I meet his green, Dragon orbs, my own are gold- and I am flying.

Hiccup is matching me, wingbeat for wingbeat, not ten feet below me, and he is radiantly beaming at me. I gasp in shock, plummeting a little bit as I stare at my wings. They're here! They're here and they're beautiful.

I laugh gleefully as I dive in the air, going off on a full scale of intricate acrobats, spinning and dipping and barrel rolling as I shape the clouds with the wind I leave behind. I can hear Hiccup's own laugh ringing through the air around me, following me closely with his own joyful tricks.

We stop in a clearing in the vapor. My wings are dripping with moisture and my eyes are clouded but I don't care. I rush to meet him, practically knocking the wind out of him as I wrap my arms around him, his wings supporting us both. This time, he doesn't wait for the shock to settle in, instead, his arms surround me, and we stay that way a moment longer than I'd normally allow.

"How-?"

"I don't know-!"

"Incredible-"

"Do you think it'll last?"



"No idea!"

We both go off on a rant when we break apart, hovering in the air as we laugh. I don't know how I Turned once more, but I'm a Dragon now and there's no way I'm not going to make the most of it.

"I thought the Dragon Queen took it away," Hiccup stated.

"I did, too," I admit. "Butâ€¦ Obviously not. I mean, look! I can fly, Hiccup!"

"Do you think it'll stay?" he asks, his voice cautious.

"I don't know," I frown. "I don't really know what to think. But either way, hey, the both of us are here, \_alive\_, and we should be thanking whoever's out there- the gods, the great Alphas- for that."

"Yeah, after you almost died," he laughs awkwardly, but I wince. It must be a sore topic for him, and the sting of hurt that he (apparently) felt still lingers.

"You know, you were going to do the same thing I was," I prod. "And you were far closer to death than I was. They weren't sure you were going to make it."

I don't mean for my voice to shake at the very end, but it had been frightening. The thought that I'd never get to talk to him or see him again wasn't something that I liked. It had been different when I was about to die for him, but when I could do nothing but stand by and watch it was a whole different tale. We both stop talking after that, glancing down. I wonder if he's struggling to stay afloat in his sea of memories, too.

The awkward moment that settles in afterward is something I don't particularly like, so I end the silence by punching him on the arm. It's not hard enough to hurt, just enough to get a rise out of him.

"Ow!" he lashes his tail in annoyance.

"That's for scaring me," I huff.

"What?" he complains, exasperated. "Is it always gonna be this way with you, because, if it is, I'm still a Night Fury and I can-"

I roll my eyes at his empty threats, momentarily pausing my wingbeats to grab the front of his shirt and press my lips to his. He's too stunned to do anything and I hide the fact that my head is swimming when I pull back. I do have a reputation to uphold, you know. His face is almost laughable, his eyes are cloudy and he looks to be in some sort of trance.

I laugh, calling over my shoulder, "Get used to it, Toothless."

"I'll just get used to it," I hear him agree in a dazed voice.

Berk is a rather interesting place, and it's far from simple. Vikings are tough, they refuse to die off because of any sort of threat, and

like seven generations before them, they thrive on this barren little island. But there's something different about this particular generation. We still have those frightening, flying, fire-throwing lizards that take over our bodies and wreak havoc on our town, but they no longer take over our minds, and the only wreckage Dragons do nowadays is when a halfling has difficulties with their new appendages or fire abilities. It's a hard life, filled with difficult choices and outcomes that we don't always find to our liking, but that's just the way it goes. You have to deal with the bad and hope that you're strong enough to make it through. We're Vikings. Being strong is what we do. However, I'm no longer just a Viking. I've hidden a secret the size of the Nine Worlds and I've risked everything on the chance that my best friend could have a chance at survival, but there must be something Odin likes about me, or that Hel hates, because my luck hasn't run out just yet. I'm still able to leisurely soar through the skies after everything that's happened, and even if my wings disappear once my feet hit the ground, I'll continue to push on. I know I'll miss it, but at least I know I'll be saying farewell. I am a Viking through and through, but there's nothing incredibly special about me. I dream of the skies because, like most of the others here on Berk, I'm just a-

"-stupid half-human!" Hiccup taunts as he zips by, a black blur in the corner of my eye and a laugh amidst the wind.

"Take that back you useless half-reptile!" I shout, speeding off after him and chasing him through the clouds, placing my trust on wings that might not last. Be that as it may, they're here for now, and that's all that really matters as they bring me that much closer to Hiccup.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Merry Christmas! Can this count as my Christmas present to you all? I can't believe it took me this long to finish the <strong>\_\*\*last\*\*\_ \*\*chapter. I'm really, \*\*\_\*\*really\*\*\_\*\*,\*\* \_\*\*reeeeeeeeally\*\*\_ \*\*sorry it took this long, and I don't actually have an acceptable excuse, I just didn't feel like writing it. However, now I can finally CELEBRATE because Soul Of A Dragon is now complete! I'm still going to go through and edit some of the first chapters every now and then when I feel like it but there won't be any more plot changes, just better writing (hopefully). Thank you to everyone who reviewed last chapter and every other one before that, I've had an amazing time writing this even though it took me practically forever to finish!\*\*

\*\*Oh, and I am writing a sequel following the plotline of HTTYD 2, but I have not started it yet so it might be a little while. I do have details but I'll save it for the story \*insert smiley face\*. Hopefully it won't be another five+ months. I'm currently working on a modern HTTYD fanfic that'll be coming out soon so keep an eye out for that if you're interested.\*\*

\*\*Thanks again, and even if you're reading this way after this story's completed, I'd really appreciate it if you reviewed, I'd love to know your thoughts, even if they're as sour as five warheads. Hope to see you again soon in another story!\*\*

End

file.